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MOCKBEGGAR

A Novel

BY

LAURENCE W. MEYNELL

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
PROLOGUE: COFFEE <i>is not</i> TAKEN in HALF MOON <i>Street</i>	I
I. DINNER <i>à deux</i> IN TOWN	9
II. DINNER <i>à quatre</i> IN MAYFIELD	27
III. A MEMORABLE DINNER <i>chez</i> JOSEF	62
IV. VISIONARIES <i>take the</i> CHAMELEON'S DISH	95
V. SUPPER <i>is</i> SERVED <i>by</i> MITHRIDATES	112
VI. MR. LYONS <i>provides</i> BUNS <i>which are</i> CURIOUSLY CONSIDERED	139
VII. A TEA-PARTY	154
VIII. JACOB B. BITES OFF <i>more than he</i> <i>can</i> CHEW	177
IX. PROBLEM PIE	191
X. AFTER <i>the</i> SAVOURY	222
XI. A LUNCHEON-PARTY	246
XII. AMBULATORY PREPARATION <i>for</i> LUNCHEON	274
XIII. WHY RACHAEL <i>refused</i> COFFEE	298

"Life—that fine folly, that superb stupidity,
that divine delusion."

"We'll dance the merry maze of Life."

ANACREON (*Cowper's trans.*).

"We saw presently a Deceiving House of
Flattering Vanity that is call'd *Mockbeggar*."

MOCKBEGGAR

PROLOGUE

COFFEE *is not* TAKEN in HALF MOON Street

IN the dining-room of a little place in Half Moon Street (such a place as you or I, mere plebeian passers-by, are greatly envious of) a lady—a high and haughty lady some called her—did what never before she had done since such things were in her ordering: she did not take coffee.

Now—and it is a matter rare enough in England for comment—the coffee was good, and the taste of that high and haughty lady was excellent; so that here is more material for thought than first of all you supposed. Be sure if you had dined in the room you would be in a position to refuse nothing, save only your departure; for it was a room as full of elegance as it was bare of furniture—which is a very rare thing in these days when so few know any difference between “replete” and *recherché*.

A small room it was and an intimate; not that

heavy intimacy of luxury, but the closer one of restraint.

Nor, if you could not quite tell solid shadow from playful substance in the corner, must you think that the three candles, so virginally dressed in their own-made crinolines of light, minded one whit; their intimacy was greater than that of anything else there, and it did not extend beyond the polished oblong of the table. Three; because Rachael said that three was a lucky number; and besides, she said, two would get so lonely and bored with each other; but three can chat merrily about us all; not that she was superstitious—she was not highly civilized enough for that—but she had a queer and sudden way of making friends with impersonal things, so that all her candles had names, and she regretted the death of one almost as much as she loved the light of it (as perhaps Nero did with the Christians). And very nice for the candles it must have been, and you may know that they were happy holocausts.

Had the candles been generous enough to throw any of their light on to the walls you would have seen (could you have taken your eyes from off that compelling face—which is doubtful, because better men than you have been moved to tears and death and happiness by it) widely spaced, each proudly king in his own domain, an

COFFEE IS NOT TAKEN

etching here by Frank Short, a drypoint there by the Master, and here and there some coloured woodcuts by Marcia Lane Foster, because Rachael, as she would explain with her short and sudden laugh, "was inclined to be hartistic, but otherwise completely sane."

In fact thankfulness for such fine food (which normally and fundamentally comes first in all men) must have given way in you to wonder at such fine elegance; and sitting there, as at a shrine, you must have begun to conjecture what manner of inner temple this rare thing possessed for her more secret intimacies, what charm and hint of what fragrance was in her bedroom. For her bedroom is the kernel of a woman's life, and, though a man may rush into that of his mistress with passion, yet he must approach that of his wife with piety; but I cannot tell you that, nor, Rachael being what she is, can any other man save one—and he is dead, so you are likely to go unanswered.

Now loneliness is all very well for mere plebeian people worried by offices and income tax and children and insufficiency of this and that, and the persistence of this disastrous Peace and one thing and another; but what, you think, has it got to do with this lovely lady, who has only to walk into the tiny hall to the telephone to have

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a dozen eager courtiers about her—what has loneliness to do, you think, with such an one? Which serves only to show your ignorance of things in general and of women in particular, because the heart of a pretty woman can be the loneliest thing in the world, unless she is also a bad woman, and then it is even lonelier.

As some one wisely said, *Magna civitas magna solitudo*, and I do not know what is more like a great city than a woman's heart; at any rate, it is usually either a city or a sieve.

Otter, a brooding pomposity, asked, "Will madam take coffee in the drawing-room?" and lo, madam would take no coffee at all, but had Otter shown surprise thereat he had not been Otter; he merely merged once more into the *chiaroscuro* and gazed reflectively at a pair of shoulders and at their sudden whiteness above the black of the dress, though what was in his mind only God Who made butlers knows. The mentality of all servants is a mystery; after long observation one can only conclude that they are a very superior sort of people who are anxious to have opportunities of watching others misbehave.

And what was in the mind of that high and haughty lady besides herself only God knew, too, and I do not think He ought to let so pretty a

## COFFEE IS NOT TAKEN

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vessel contain so much of bitterness. For we all arrive, I suppose (especially at the ages of twenty-six, thirty-six, forty-six, fifty-six, sixty-six, and, if we live longer, seventy-six and eighty-six), at the point when we come to think that we really have after all just about got the measure of Life, and that it is all very nice and jolly, but not particularly surprising or personal, and then one morning Life gets up somewhat early and, putting on extra large boots, walks carefully all over us, particularly twice on all our soft spots, which is objectionable.

Personally I think about Life that if you are serious you are sure to get hurt, but that if you are cynical you may well be saved; but I was not there to impart my wisdom to Rachael, and had I been she would probably have asked in her sudden sort of way, "Saved from what?" and upon my soul I should not have been able to answer, but must have hedged—saying that that was just one more example of what Life is, a continual being asked questions without knowing the answers; that is why, I suppose, they say that one's schooldays are one's happiest time; there at least one can crib for the exams. . . .

What she did actually say, very low to her own heart, was, "This is idiotic, Ray; after all, it's not immeasurable; there is living and dying and lov-

## MOCKBEGGAR

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ing, and you know the limits of them all; the thing cannot hurt you immeasurably."

"Liar," she said, "the thing *is* immeasurable, and it *can* hurt you immeasurably. Every small and trivial thing like love and death and hate becomes infinite in the heart. . . . O you fool . . . you fool . . . in the heart infinite. . . ."

And all this she wished very much to say aloud to the other occupant of the room, but she dared not because of Otter (which was a very strange lapse on her part, and one which shows you how perturbed she was; for, as everybody knows, the really correct thing to do with servants is to treat them as if they were non-existent—as indeed in these days they mostly are—and if you happen to think that the butler's false teeth are too prominent you should not hesitate to say so at dinner before him—at least, so Father Ronald Knox says, and he ought to know after all his dealings with Lady Opal Porstock and her *high life*).

And looking at her three candles, now grown stumpier and dumpier and giving the appearance of having curtsied in their crinolines of light, she realized that she had not named them that evening (but they might well have been called Judas Iscariot and Talleyrand and any empire-building politician millionaire you can think of); and she thought, those candles are all the years of dis-

grace, all the years since the War, and each stands almost exactly for two years; and suddenly the three candles became thirty, and she knew the room full of all the gay and gallant company that once informed it—Vivian, the gay and dashing Vivian, the amused and bored but always tolerant Frank, Hugh the dark and inscrutable, so alive, so vivid, such a triumph for our generation, so Elizabethan.

Oh, the gay and gallant Georgians; and through all their ghostly laughter, their ghostly gallantry, their ghostly wit, smiled, with a sickly steadiness, the other one in the room. . . . Vivian and Hugh and Frank and. . . .” Ah, Otter, you may put the candles out.”

“Very good, madam,” and Otter, with inexpressible Otterism went statelily towards the candles, walking with the greatest exactitude right through the centre of the other figure in the room . . . for the Other Occupant was a ghost, a poor, attenuated ghost, and Otter was too much for him. . . .

“I will go out,” said Rachael, “and you must summon me a taxi.”

And out Rachael did go, though where to neither I nor any man dare guess. Had you caught a glimpse of her (as I did) stepping from the door to the motor you must have thought

“How black,” for over her black dress she wore a black wrap, but her eyes were much blacker than them all—they looked like tree-fringed, sunken pools wherein men drown themselves for love; they looked like flaming velvet; and you might have thought, noting all her fineness and her finery and catching a suggestion of the scent about her, you might have thought (foolishly) of luxury; of plenty, and of starvation in the next street, and of Bolshevism, and of Revolution, as at that time many people did think of such things; but nobody explained how Lenin or Trotsky or Mr. Scrymgeour could have prevented themselves from falling in love with Rachael had they come to superintend her execution; but Rachael always said that she would soon prevent them, especially, she was always careful to add, Mr. Scrymgeour.

So I, looking at her, thought none of these foolish things, but being in London, and in Half Moon Street, I fell to thinking sadly of all the gay and gallant people I had known in it, of all the dear and desperate people I had met there, of all the friendships and the follies we committed, of all the fine and foolish things we said; oh, the Georgians, the gay and gallant Georgians. . . .

## CHAPTER I

### DINNER *à deux* IN TOWN

**I**T will probably be a fact incredible to future historians of our age, usually accounted so un-Spartan, that in it people actually paid, and paid willingly, in so far as one can do these things willingly, for the privilege of being squashed to death.

Yet so it is; however, April—and this is April—is a very peculiar month, and in it people are apt to do very peculiar things; men, for instance, face their tailors without much hope, but with success; and tailors send in their bills without any hope and with less success; and the London General Omnibus Company introduce new types of buses in which many more people can stand on one's feet than ever before; and some of the uglier London statues have all the nice, mellowing dirt carefully washed away; and for one or two days the English weather shows what it really can do if it tries, and everybody vows their intention of going to the very first garden-party of the summer . . . and then, of course, it pours. . . .

However, this time it forgot to pour, and, as Vivian remarked, somewhat painedly, there was much more party about than garden. And if one excepted those massive rocks of dowagery-looking people who were scattered about like lumps of the British Constitution everybody really did seem in some danger of being squashed to death.

And Vivian said, "What wonderful people, and they *are* dowagery-looking; you are right, Frank, quite remarkably right; they are the Dowager Isles.

"They are," he said after a moment's reflection, "the Isles of Grace, and I think perhaps, if we carefully choose a time when *nobody* is standing on our feet, that we had better cruise among them."

"Well, perhaps," suggested Frank, "you might take one of your feet off mine for a start—thanks. But seriously, Vivian, do you think that we had better dash about? I mean, we shall be continually accosted by people we don't know to buy things we don't want."

"But that," Vivian objected, "is surely the very essence of garden-partyism, or partyship, or shop, or whatever it is; and besides," as a gentle after-thought, "I know everybody" (and this was very nearly true of Mr. Vivian Tancred Dalmeny of St. Jermyn Street).

"Quite; but think of all the people who will refuse to acknowledge your knowledge——"

"My dear Frank, don't ensnare me with aphorisms, and anyway I shall buy nothing from anybody that I don't like."

"Besides," said Vivian, "'Orace, where's your 'istery?' I mean, consider the thing mathematically—are we less likely to meet more people (please don't misunderstand me) by staying still than by moving about?"

"Quite," said Frank. "Don't approach us, Miss Felstead; my friend is plunged in problems——"

"It is, for instance," Vivian was saying, "comparable to that old question of whether one should run to the corner of the road in order to catch the next bus or not, and whether one is more likely to if one does."

"But after all," he said, "there is always another bus just coming."

"Yes, and there is always one just gone," said Frank.

"True," Vivian mused; "what a lot of buses there must be; we must count them or something some day."

"But," objected Frank somewhat strongly, "one doesn't run for buses, does one? I mean, buses; well, how does one get in?"

## MOCKBEGGAR

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"Ah, indeed, how? I fancy you lie on the road and make a noise like a cow, and then they catch you in a peculiar little contrivance called a cow-catcher, and there you are; but here comes Chickie, and he does actually and really and truly travel in buses—I know, because I saw him with a bus-ticket once, and it was of a most fascinating colour just like the eyes of a girl I used to know, so that I meant to ask him what route it came from. . . . Hallo, Chickie, what are you, a seller, a sellee, or merely sold?"

"And Chickie," he said, "what about buses, how does one get in and so on?"

"Get in a bus? Why, on the step, of course——"

"Ah, steps, of course—how interesting, and I had always connected them with charwomen somehow! and doesn't one really lie on the road and make a——?"

"Lie on the road—of course not, Vivian, you ass."

"Ass," echoed Frank severely.

"Another illusion gone," sighed Vivian, full of regret. "O Chickie, why do you constantly enter my childish faiths like this; I was always fond of that one and the one about the horse head. I always thought that you best helped a horse up by sitting on its head, and only a

few days ago a man told me that that was wrong——”

“You sit on its head,” Chickie explained, “in order that——”

Now who shall explain why the rest of that careful and no doubt useful explanation was drowned in most ill-mannered mirth by those two careless, and, as many thought, useless young men? . . . Chickie certainly could not. . . .

It was a very curious crowd that was treated to that hilarious outburst of laughter (and Vivian's laughter, as somebody once rather cruelly said, was just like mumps, being both painful and infectious), a crowd curious both subjectively and objectively; and I am not going to say anything about its objective curiousness, because I don't really believe that it had any, but I have put that in just to please those who talk about the psychology of a crowd. Actually the only thing I have ever noticed about crowds is a certain sort of compressed humanity business—what some witty person called *esprit de corps*.

But subjectively it was intensely curious; curious with that intense earnestness of those whose business in life it is to be able to say first about others what they fear others will say about them. Very little it was that escaped the eyes and ears of those polished and pleasant people, so that

there was quite a sinking in the many predatory maternal bosoms when that unmistakable laugh was heard.

"Oh, there's Vivian Dalmeny," everybody said, and sure enough there he was.

Nor was the sinking stayed until his companion was observed—"Oh, he's with Mr. Martindale; *aren't* they a jolly couple?" And, you know, they *were* a jolly couple; *vox populi vox Dei*, and though this particular crowd was just a shade too cultured to be flattered by the platitude still there it is. Vivian, people said, was the best-dressed young man in London, with (added real connoisseurs) Lord Tallboy's valet a very good second; he had, it was commonly reported, the finest cellar in St. Jermyn Street and quite the most incomparable butler—it was rumoured—in the world.

All of which things were very nearly true, and in addition to them he was rich, really and quite fabulously so; and once or twice a year he would walk gaily to his bank, because he liked the atmosphere of it (it was, he said, the very nearest he ever got to divine worship), and ask in his cheerful way, "I suppose I still have some money left, Phipps?" and Mr. Phipps, for twenty-two years presiding Deity in that Temple, almost double with respect, would smile reverently: "Quite

a lot, Mr. Dalmeny; oh, quite a lot, sir; let me see——” and while he was “seeing” Vivian would walk his gay way out again, because he “had to meet a fellow.”

And so he treated Life. He was always just going “to meet a fellow,” or “to shoot a bird,” or “to hit a ball”; always just going or coming; he never stayed; and people with him were either “jolly” or “nasty,” and you very soon knew which you were.

And altogether with his fine air, and his gaiety and his laugh, his utter disregard of you and his queer outbursts of generosity, his effortless superiority and his profession of vast ignorance, he was very insufferable and very desirable.

Which was a fitting thing in that somewhat extraordinary year (now ever to be remembered as a memorable year, the Last of All the Years) when Ireland was quite full of people preparing to kill one another, and Hyde Park railings were positively festooned with misguided women who (but the newspapers never explained how they accomplished it) kept tying themselves there.

Whereat the Old People (they who got us into all the trouble and to whom, curiously enough, in those days we used to pay profound respect) shook their heads dismally, which did not matter, and their fists angrily, which mattered less; but

one was much too afraid to point out that at least the people in Ireland and the women on the railings had found something, however fantastic, worth dying for and for which they were prepared to die, which was a very rare and refreshing thing in those days or in these.

However, the Old People made up for it gallantly later, because very soon they found quite a lot of things worth dying for and for which they were quite heroically prepared that we should die.

So that Vivian accorded well with his year; and by that year he had experienced all things and been everywhere, had met everybody and done everything; and in the process he had acquired charming manners and insufferable conceit, and he knew nothing whatsoever and was to be rudely awakened, which is to say that, just like you or me, he was exactly twenty-two.

A witty lady once trying to describe him to her friend (and girls are delightfully frank and naïve and cruel and beastly in their dissections of the coarser sex) after a dance whereat he had been altogether charming to her in an offhand sort of way, because Vivian was very good at making polite love and was nearly as fond of it as he was of dancing, said—seeking for a simile—“Never say ‘a fish out of water,’ my dear; say simply ‘Vivian out of Mayfair’.”

In his cruise among the Dowager Isles Vivian steered an idle course, being careful, as he explained, "to let himself be more bumped against than bumptious" until he caught sight of Mrs. Macready, and then he displayed social seamanship.

"No, not Mrs. Macready, Frank; I know that it's cowardice, but she is altogether much too penetrating.

"It's like suddenly meeting one's conscience in the street," he added, "and that would be very awkward."

"Yours would probably cut you."

"And yours isn't sharp enough to, quite; but look at Chickie; now just where does Chickie get such interesting friends from?"

Said Frank with an easy, offhand air, "Ah, I know these people."

"The devil you do," Vivian expostulated; "then let us attach ourselves." And in their elegant way they attached themselves; for, as Vivian carefully explained, "there is nothing hard about *joining* pleasant company"; at their advent Chickie scowled horribly and proceeded to talk desperately and long; but Vivian just smiled and waited.

And if you want to know what anchored him read no further; so elusive it is that the pen fails

utterly to ensnare it. For this was Rachael, even then the quite incomparable; no one else so queenly and compelling, nowhere else such eyes—eyes so dark and daring, so luminous and so utterly lovely.

In the days of Charles, he thought, she would have been a royal mistress; in the more virtuous days of George her activities are probably not so confined; but he had to be cynical to comfort himself, and those were not his real thoughts. . . .

Her dress—how shall one describe it? She floated on a film of blue; and the blackness of those eyes over the vagueness of that blue was startling: anyway, it must have been something out of the common, because "Mrs. A." commented on it in her "Diary" in *Truth* that week. And her shoes, the most important part of any woman's dress, were exquisite; thought Vivian, whose eyes had naturally wandered in that direction, "nearly fit for her feet."

She was one of those women who present to men a most convincing view of things that don't exist. . . .

(Mr. Rachael was there, too; and, one supposes, Mrs. R. Vivian said after that the father looked the typical Brewer, but Frank maintained it was the Unmistakable Banker. Vivian insisted, claiming special knowledge of bankers; "besides,"

he argued, "where was his ledger? . . ." and anyway nobody cared. . . .)

So having attached themselves they talked; Chickie was of opinion that the whole thing was a Bore; Frank agreed and was hardly restrained from being alliterative, but Mrs. Rachael said that it was all for a good cause and that one met so *many* nice people; and Vivian was silent. Mr. R. seemed possessed of three unalterable opinions to which he adhered with admirable constancy, viz., (*a*) that his cough was a trifle easier, (*b*) that the glass was falling steadily, (*c*) that Oxford had nothing like the team they had last year, and (*d*) that his cough—oh, here we are again; well, he was just like that, a recurring decimal in conversation—but without any point.

And, of course, nobody could stand the strain of that for very long, and so what with one thing and another and gaily talking of this and that (but mostly of that), the party disintegrated, and Vivian found himself next to Rachael (he was very good at finding himself next to people), and simultaneously Rachael, the Incomparable, was fain of an Ice; and together they hunted for an Ice.

These things just happened to Vivian. Nor if you asked me what became of Chickie could I

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tell you, because for the moment I care as little as did Vivian.

Ices being procured they sat down to devour same.

"You," said Rachael, "are Vivian Dalmeny."

"And," she added, "I have heard of you."

"The devil you have," thought Vivian, saying aloud that reputations are like fortunes—quickly made and easily lost. "Which," he explained, "is by way of being an epigram."

"And is about as entertaining to listen to as a telegram," said Rachael, "but how was it that you did not know me?"

"I cannot possibly imagine. I am usually so up to date in these matters, too. By the way, how did Chickie come to know you?"

"Chickie?"

"Ah, he would not have unbent so far, of course. Mr. Charles fyer-Wilson, complete with hyphen."

"—complete with hyphen——" and Rachael busied herself with a silence. In conversation she was always like that; she spoke suddenly and she was silent suddenly (though how one could be silent any other way I do not know), and if you were wise you learned more from her silences than from her speech. "I like him," she said; "he's a pet. . . ."

"A ponderous one, surely," ventured Vivian.

"Which is more than I do you, Vivian Dalmeny," she said abruptly.

"But how unconventional of you," he exclaimed. "Everybody likes me."

"But I," said Rachael, "am not amongst the everybodies" (and that was very, very true indeed); "and I must dislike you, Dalmeny—you permit that?" she asked, turning suddenly to him and resting a quick hand momentarily on his knee—"because we are so alike. You have too much *savoir faire*, your manners are altogether too charming, and you have no faith in life, no creed."

"Nor," she added quietly, "have I any creed, or little; and we should flounder hopelessly together, you and I; at least your faithlessness would devour my faith, your creedlessness my creed."

"But I have a creed," Vivian expostulated vigorously; "decidedly I have. I sing it every morning in my bath quite loudly—*Credo in Vitam*."

"But how Dalmenyish, and does it mean anything?"

"Absolutely," said Vivian, "or rather tremendously; it means," he said, "that I believe in living life with a gesture."

"Oh!" she cried, suddenly jumping up, "but

## MOCKBEGGAR

how fine a phrase, how really fine! But that is much more, that is no less than Vivianesque—see the danger already——” and as suddenly, with a little delighted clap of her hands, she slid away, leaving him and her half-finished ice together.

Damn it, Vivian thought, she's like a jack-in-the-box; he also thought she was like quite a lot of other things that he had never seen before in his life; he further thought, being Vivian, that he might as well finish her ice, which he proceeded to do.

. . . . .  
After all of which, of course, a little dinner was indicated; and after that a music-hall. So Vivian and Frank went by way of St. Jermyn Street—because Frank was at that time staying with Vivian, he being the sort of person with whom somebody always is staying—to the grill-room of the Piccadilly Hotel, where they dined.

Personally I am very sorry that they chose the Piccadilly, but there it is, and familiarity always did contend with fastidiousness in those two; and there they made as handsome and somewhat wickedly attractive a pair of young men as might be seen dining anywhere in town.

Nor am I going to tell you the names of all the gorgeous and weirdly worded things that one waiter kept putting before them and another kept

snatching away, because you would not understand them, and in any case I have forgotten; but I do remember that Vivian had a kipper, because, as he explained, it was one of his principles always to have a kipper in the Piccadilly, and as it seemed to be one of their principles always to have everything everybody wanted the coveted kipper appeared with a disappointing absence of fuss.

The talk turned upon the events and people of the day; upon Charles fyer-Wilson (complete with hyphen). Vivian, it appeared, liked Chickie, "who," he said, "is a thundering good sort and much too serious not to succeed."

"But honestly I cannot help thinking that he faces Mrs. Macready, for instance, with far less confusion than do I."

"He has reached," said Frank, "the fundamentals of life."

"Quite; the fundamentals without the fun."

They had reached, you observe, under the guiding influence of some excellent Moselle, the stage of dinnergrams.

"And Miss Massinger . . .?"

"Ah," said Vivian, "have some port."

And so to the Palace, where one Miss Hetty Prince was very much in evidence; and of whom Vivian was for the twentieth time immediately enamoured; and Miss Hetty, noticing his arrival,

which was timed with precisely the correct unpunctuality, greeted him as an old favourite with a special smile, which some fat man sitting next to Vivian misconstrued as his and regretted more than ever the presence of his wife; nasty fellow, thought Vivian, and aloud to Frank, "The optimism of people is in direct proportion to their utter impossibility."

"Quite," said Frank judicially. "Quite. Pretty topping, isn't she?"

And Miss Hetty Prince was pretty topping with her well-cut trousers and her silver-knobbed stick, her silky "topper" and her unmanageable monocle.

"Stroll with me down Piccadilly, walk with me in Leicester Square," sang Miss Hetty Prince; and Vivian's eyes followed her closely; but if you or any other thought that his liking for her was exclusively a sexual one you were mistaken, and it shows how little you know your Vivian; he loved the swaggering bravado of the thing, the almost defiant tautness of limbs that loved their work, the brave vibration each way free of such a responsive body; these things charmed him. . . .

"Stroll with me down Piccadilly . . ."

The daintiness of the coquetry . . . but these things could not go on for ever, and so one leaned back and longed for a cigarette, and one looked

round—and, lo, there was Chickie “looking for the music,” as Vivian said; “and who is that with him, the Westlake girl?”

“Um, Dorothy Westlake; rather fond of you once, wasn’t she, Viv?”

“God forbid; but even then if He did some women would take no notice. . . .”

And so after “God save the King,” during which, of course, the fat man was looking for his hat, back to St. Jermyn Street and to bed. On the way back a shadow detached itself from a background of shadows and approached them. . . . A shadow with a pale and rather pathetic face. . . . Frank moved awkwardly on . . . the shadow said the usual futile things, and Vivian, repressing with difficulty a witty retort which rose naturally to his lips, fumbled with his sovereign-case and swept off his hat gallantly in good-night—which, he assured himself as he hurried after Frank, was living life with a gesture.

“Low friend of yours?” Frank asked encouragingly.

“Frank, my boy, I have been tempted; my whole moral structure shook; my foot was placed, as it were, on the path to perdition or wherever it is that one’s feet are on the path to——”

“Quite,” said Frank. . . .

“And now,” said Vivian, “I shall run home,”

## MOCKBEGGAR

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which he proceeded to do at a very great pace, to the exceeding consternation of several dozen constables. Letting himself in with his latchkey, he hummed the swaggering tune of gallant Hetty . . . "Walk with me in Leicester Square. . . ." Oh, life was very pleasant and easy on that warm April night in London in that most Damoclean year 1914.

And there was always, he reflected in his pyjamas (at no other time did Vivian allow himself to reflect than when clad in silk pyjamas), there was always Miss Massinger to give a zest to things. . . .

## CHAPTER II

### DINNER *à quatre* IN MAYFIELD

**T**HIS, of course, was the time of holidays, "which consist," as Frank said, "in an infinite capacity for being pained." And everybody took holidays, some saying that there was nothing like golf, but others said that there was nothing like tennis, while those who were going abroad for the first time said that nobody, of course, stayed in England for a holiday.

Rachael, having just bought a car (Mr. R. the Unmistakable Brewer being, as somebody said, "juicy but generous"), declared that nothing would ever part her from it and that within a week she would cover quite an incredible number of miles, and so saying started out. And Hugh, the dark and quite inscrutable Hugh, of whom yet you know nothing, took no holiday at all except to go to his little cottage in the country, where he took with him all the imposing papers and documents with which a barrister is bound up—and, of course, his pipe; Hugh always smoked a pipe

and sat in the background and smiled a little and took stock of people and looked quite darkly on.

But in this business of holidays Vivian was quite the most surprising—that is, if one has any right to be surprised at anything such a person does; for having heard of curious resolves on the part of one fyer-Wilson Vivian became engaged in telephonic conversation on a fine morning of June of that year. Said Vivian, to the ridiculous little toy that the Postmaster-General provides, and quite wasting one of his engaging smiles on it, "Met a man to-day, Chickie. He said something about a walk."

"What man?" said Chickie, who was always very curt and businesslike—especially in the morning—"and what walk?"

"Jolly man," said Vivian, "and your walk."

"Oh . . . my walking-tour, you mean?"

"Sorry, walking-tour; man said 'walk.' "

"Well, what about it?"

"Thought I'd like to attach myself. Would you be bored?"

"I should be delighted, of course, but do you really want to come, Vivian?"

"Absolutely; I've never seen a rolling road; besides—oh, well; but nothing prodigious, you know."

"Oh, rather not, just a fair average per day."

"Very reasonable," said Vivian. "Yes?"

"But, on the other hand, nothing pubcrawlsh," Chickie warned.

"Oh, quite; beer, so to speak, but not in buckets."

And so a mean was struck between pubcrawls and prodigies, and that wonderfully complementary couple started on their curiously Christian act.

Chickie, as it was subsequently reported in Mayfair, "carried exactly fifteen and a half pounds weight in a knapsack" (but there was a diversity of opinion, for some said "ruck-sack"), "and Vivian had a lot of debonair and a tooth-brush."

. . . . .

Quite a lot they learnt about one another, these two, in that strenuous week. It was a time, you will remember, when a wave of Bellocism was sweeping over the clever young idea; when Heaven was conceived to be adequately represented by a cheese-factory with a brewery attached, and it was held to be a Christian act to drink and a Christian act, though doubtfully a good one, to get drunk. So that large numbers of brewers became converts and were most devout, praying fervently for the spread of the faith.

And with Mr. Belloc was Mr. Chesterton, who wrote a lot of books devoted exclusively to one topic, being probably the most monstrously simple and single-minded man of letters alive. And Mr. Chesterton said of beer that it was like Protestantism, of water that it resembled Agnosticism, and of wine that it stood for Catholicism, but of whisky that it was a counterpart of Spiritualism. He himself, I think, is Pantheistically inclined.

So that quite a following of people with Bellocose views grew up, who consoled themselves on the morning after with the poet's thought that

*Christian men who follow my sign  
May tipple in inns like so many swine.*

And Vivian, sitting in the garden of the Red Cow at Wilmshurst, was quite in the vein, saying jovially to his cheese, "O cheese, of all cheeses the most cheesily cheesiest," which was a very good Bellocosian sentiment, and one which Vivian did not share in the least—he devouring cold meat and pickles and leaving the cheese to Chickie, who ate it, apparently, on strictly religious grounds and from motives of loyalty. And a very sad and curious thing it is that two men should by their banging and ranting and their stomachic Christianity have so enslaved a vast number of

young men who will never even see their masters and who are by them bound to a most indigestible diet.

The Red Cow behind them and their lunches inside them, they took the road, falling presently into a great silence bred, for it was partly a good silence, of satisfied interiors, and also, for it was partly a bad silence, of sore exteriors.

Until presently a prodigious swiftness was tamed into purring impatience beside them, and a voice, quite unlike any other voice before or since, and most like, thought Vivian, an oasis of silver sound, said invitingly, "Be Eliases." (But that was quite all right, because Chickie knew his Bible history, and as they sped forward subsequently he conducted a learned dispute with himself as to the correct form of the plural.)

"But," objected Chickie, "we are on a tour, a walking-tour."

"And we," the silvery voice said, "are also on a tour, a motoring-tour, aren't we, Doro? It is the irrepressible suffragette in us working its way out, isn't it, Doro?"

And Dorothy Westlake from her side affirmed that these things were so.

"And I do think," said Rachael, "that you should take pity on us, because this car is a mystery to me; and it has been a very well-behaved

mystery for a fortnight, which is much longer than any other mystery has been known to exist without either being understood or turning nasty. Do you take pity, Chickie? Do you, Mr. Dalmeny?"

There were affirmatives.

In due course evening arrived, and Rachael persuaded her monster to stay long enough at Mayfield for them to get out. It was decided, in deference to Chickie's well-known devotion to the conventions, that the female element should stay at the Crown and the male at the Anchor. "But," said Vivian, protesting against so unnatural a division, "we must dine together."

And so two young men and two young women dined together that night at the Crown Hotel in Mayfield; and they were very lively and very gay, and the waiter enjoyed waiting on them and liked them even before he got his extravagant tip. What few women were in the place looked once at Rachael and then refused to notice her; the more numerous men looked and then steadfastly refused to notice anything else. Because Rachael was like that, and no amount of wild careering in her monster could alter her appearance one whit; she was always Rachael the quite Incomparable; and her eyes were always the eyes of Rachael, the most sad and laughing and lovely things in the world.

There is a curious tale about Rachael's eyes; there are many, but there is one in particular of an artist, a great society portrait-painter. I may not mention his name, but he was a very great man, and his watchword was candour; he said that he was "candid on his canvas," and the amazing thing is that people paid heavily for his candour. Lots of great builders of Empire and statesmen—especially of the Lloyd George vintage after the War—went to him to be painted, and as faithfully as ever he could he showed in their faces the decayed sponges that were better than their souls, and, lo, they were delighted. No one quite knew why; some said that they could not see, but others said that that was immaterial as they would not know a soul if they saw one. A very strange thing and a very great man.

This great artist heard much of Rachael and was fain of her to paint her portrait.

Now never before had he seen her until she sat still and smiling opposite him in his studio; and then it seemed to him that never before had he seen anybody else.

And the portrait being somewhat finished he came to put in the eyes, but try as he might, juggle howsoever with paints and palette and brushes, he could make not a stroke that was satisfactory towards their completion. So that finally in

despair he left them undone, and he said to Rachael in his gallant way, "This is the first time that I have met something which I cannot paint," and he sent her just a blank canvas with but "Rachael" written at the bottom of it and his initials; and she set it proudly up in her room, saying that it was the prettiest compliment she had been paid for a long time.

Then he behaved very foolishly after the manner of his kind and fell violently in love with her, pacing Half Moon Street in a melancholy sort of fashion for hours at a time; until Rachael grew annoyed, saying that dogs were jolly, that human dogs were a nuisance, but that artistic dogs were positively intolerable; and she went quickly to some obscure dauber in Soho and had executed of herself a most garish, tawdry thing, which, packing it carefully, she left on the great man's doorstep; and when he saw it he was violently sick, and the sickness cured him of his love, and Rachael might again look openly out of the windows in Half Moon Street.

And all that of Rachael's eyes—eyes which now across a fishy waste were fixed quietly on Vivian.

"What an extraordinary thing that you should walk, Dalmeny."

"Oh, I don't know. We wanted a little Chertonic."

"But surely he doesn't walk much."

"He has an ambulatory soul, I think."

"Once in a bus——" began fyer-Wilson.

"No, no, you don't, Chickie; that positively came out of the ark."

"Yes, positively archaic," said Rachael, "but go on. I like to talk about souls."

"Ah, we all dream about things we haven't got."

"Oh, please, *please*," said Rachael, "this dinner-party is beginning to be brilliant, and positively I couldn't stand that. It reminds me awfully of one of those plays where the audience look so expectant that you fear something clever may be said at almost any moment. I always feel that I should be frightfully good at this sort of thing if nobody else read Shaw."

"But do people read Shaw?" asked Vivian. "I thought he was a vegetarian or something."

"Only a vegetable, I am afraid," Rachael said with genuine regret, "but if you take a little *sauce piquante* with him he's quite nice."

"I read Shaw," said Chickie, "and I am not brilliant."

"Never?" Vivian asked earnestly.

"Well, hardly ever." There was a disturbing peal of laughter that reminded Chickie vaguely of a garden-party; but Rachael did not laugh;

she regarded him quite seriously and long through drooping eyelashes.

"I don't believe you are, Chickie," she said, "and I like it in you."

"But Doro, on the other hand," she said, "likes brilliants."

"-ance?" queried Chickie.

"-ants."

"Ah," said Vivian, "that is very much too subtle for me; my mind is too small for subtleties."

"And too lazy, I think, for love," said Miss Westlake. "You have little discernment, Mr. Dalmeny."

After which extraordinary saying there was quite a considerable silence until Vivian secured a waiter by shouting much more loudly than anybody else dared, and at the prospect of liqueurs everybody cheered up.

Rachael had a benedictine.

Chickie had a crème de menthe.

Vivian had a chartreuse.

And Miss Westlake ordered a kümmel, of which she tasted not a drop.

. . . . .

Then sat Vivian and Rachael in a small garden, their seats somewhat closely disposed, and Rachael was seized of a curious conceit that such

a small garden as they sat in, surrounded by its small low wall and its small green trees, had never existed before and most certainly would never exist again; and these illusions through lazy, loitering cigarette smoke she conveyed to Vivian in that silvery voice that was so much like running water that one mistook it for distant bells.

"It looks," she said, "so clear and sharp and toylike, as if it were cut in cardboard like a toy pantomine property"; which vagueness she invested somewhat with conviction by little jabs of her curious green amber cigarette-holder, about which there was rather an intriguing legend that it had been presented to her, together with his heart, by a devoted Italian Count of great degree, and that she had thankfully accepted the holder and somewhat carelessly rejected the heart, saying, it was alleged, that amber was in fashion, but that hearts decidedly were not.

"It is a queer thing, Vivian Dalmeny," she said, "our meeting again like this, don't you think? No decent novelist could possibly treat of it without references to threads and looms of life and so on. Do you think life is a loom? Don't say 'yes,' because I feel I should have to wear clogs if you did."

"Life," said Vivian decidedly, "is not a loom. It is a lemon."

## MOCKBEGGAR

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"*That* must be the chartreuse; besides, you have forgotten your quotation—an onion surely; you overlook my extensive acquaintance with French literature."

"No, a lemon decidedly. And it isn't the chartreuse; it's an epigram, and it needs expansion. Epigrams are like oysters—they need opening. . . ."

"And how seldom one finds a pearl."

"Life is the lemon which we suck in the half-time of eternity. It is opened."

"Um, a pearl without price; and what a nasty word 'suck' is."

"Don't be a purist," he said; and after a silence, "Miss Massinger on Life, please."

Rachael waved her cigarette-holder, which was empty, towards him.

"Of course," she said, taking a cigarette, "you will laugh at me, Vivian Dalmeny—at any rate afterwards—but I do think that life is extraordinary and that the time has come when I should tell somebody what I think about it. There are so many things to enjoy and so few people to enjoy them with, and somehow just the people whom most you thought you would enjoy things with are suddenly swamped in a silly sort of sentimental emotionalism. It is like throwing aside the *Spectator* for the *News of the World*."

"I do think that the intellect should enjoy life and not the emotions. It is commonly said, I know, that when I marry it will be either for money or love, or both; but that is ridiculous, because owing to a thirst providentially inherent in people I have plenty of money, and certainly I should never marry a man's body, but only his mind. . . ."

"But this is positively extraordinary——"

"Didn't I say that it was? And, Vivian, I am not a womanly woman; no, no, no, I am *not*. Children I think are catastrophic and husbands positively horrible. I will have nobody near me who does not fall in love with me, and to be made love to by one man for the rest of one's life would be terrible. . . ."

"But you might vary the theme on others," suggested Vivian.

"But then if so, I mean if infidelity is the soul of matrimony, why go to the trouble of marrying?"

"Quite," said Vivian thoughtfully.

"Some women," Rachael said after a pause, "are born mothers and some are born mistresses, and I am a born mistress."

"But how exciting," murmured Vivian.

"Not a bit; I think that it is going to be rather troublesome really. I do so desperately want to

enjoy things and I can't find anyone to enjoy them with me; that's why one has to be flippant. My flippancy," she said, "is a sort of defensive armour against life; and, Vivian, why are you flippant?"

"My flippancy," said Vivian, who had had time to think of this, "I began as a pose, but I have adopted it as a policy.

"But, Rachael," he said rather more slowly, "about a thousand years ago I saw you in a garden quite full of rather jolly people, and I said, 'There is a woman of degree and quite an unusual woman.' And I, too, must be unusual, because everybody says so, and, besides, I get so much fun out of life. Now don't you think that on intellectual and logical grounds——" He laughed a little, looking into those dark eyes that were, he thought, so full of temptation and allurements, so bright with invitation and desire. Perhaps he was a little surprised (but I think not) when their owner said slowly:

"You are a very wicked man, Dalmeny, and a dangerous one, I think; because you run quite violently and deliberately down a steep place into the sea, and I thought I slip down to it more in the effort of climbing . . ."

"But," he objected, "we shall both go down in the end, and how much more easy it is and more

logical," he argued, "to turn round and run."

Then for quite a long time they looked steadily at one another—that strange, handsome couple in that strange, unsubstantial garden—as not unwilling antagonists might. Then Rachael laughed a low and liquid laugh that seemed to come from nowhere and to run on silver feet round everywhere; which was perhaps a fitting conclusion to so strange a conversation.

. . . . .

"Mr. Dalmeny has made a joke," said a voice out of the darkness; "you must have found him entertaining, Ray."

"As surely you did, Chickie, my dear; you have been away ages."

"Oh, rather; I never knew so much astronomy in all my life before."

"Chickie," Vivian accused him, "you have been serious; but then, for the matter of that, so have I, desperately so; haven't I, Miss Massinger?"

"Desperately," she assured him, "is the word; but then I was in a sombre mood that attacks me quite unsuspectedly; and now it has gone and I am in a mood for dancing. Wherefore," she said, "let us dance."

And on the moistened lawn in the vagueness of the evening, with the stately jerks of a London ballroom, they danced—Rachael with Chickie

(for she had a heart), but Vivian with Miss Westlake.

. . . . .

Some one once said a very penetrating thing about Dalmeny which now you must hear or you are like entirely to misunderstand him. It was that Vivian lived in inverted commas; and so he did; but to such a stage had he carried it (turning a pose into a policy, *he* called it) that he himself never quite knew at this time whether he was in *oratio obliqua* or *oratio recta* (which Latinists won't like, but they will have to lump it).

Now these were traits of Vivian's:

That he had more clothes than conscience.

That his manners were much more charming than those of anyone else you can think of (except possibly Hugh, and his were faultless rather than charming)—and that without any effort whatsoever.

That policemen invariably saluted him.

That both men and women referred to him as "Vivian" (except, of course, Rachael).

That he seldom swore, being as fastidious in language as in all else.

That of design he was quite abominably selfish.

That he was much too brilliant not to be bored.

That all his pyjamas were of green silk.

That his bath-salts were Morny's "Mysterieuse."

. . . . .

Vivian descended suddenly upon St. Jermyn Street with his debonair and his toothbrush, and there, of course, was Frank, quite unmoved by such violent goings and comings. And when they were both in a "dressing-gown and glue" mood (which Vivian said meant sticking up late) Frank's wisdom was sought and consulted.

"Have some whisky," said Frank, "and proceed."

"The idea," Vivian said, "was splendid; we must certainly give Chickie full marks for it."

"Quite," said Frank; "quite full."

"A walking-tour is very good fun," Vivian said, "except, of course, the walking; and we saw quite a lot of jolly people and places; in Sussex, you know; all round Mayfield and that part of the world."

"In Mayfield," he said, "it was that we dined with Miss Massinger——"

"Ah——"

"—and very jolly it was. That, Frank, is a woman of degree, and I do quite immensely admire her, but very extraordinary things she said to me in the garden afterwards."

"All women," said Frank, "say extraordinary

things in gardens, especially after dinner. Have some whisky."

"Not at all; not, at least, as Rachael did."

"As Rachael did?"

"But who else?"

"Oh, quite."

"She is the only person I have ever met," said Vivian, "who could possibly compete for my affections with myself. Most women cling for a while and their memory disappears, but Rachael disappears and her memory clings. After all," he said, "the real test of a girl is whether you can think of her when you are kissing the next one; and I never can, it's so confusing; but I could think of Rachael if I were kissing Helen of Troy."

"Have some whisky," said Frank, "at once."

"Some of her sayings are quite disconcertingly illuminating. Now Dorothy Westlake said at dinner——"

"Oh, Miss Westlake was there?"

"Of course; didn't I say so?"

"Oh, several times, but I forgot; go on."

"Miss Westlake said that I was scintillating——"

"My God!"

"—and Rachael said that there was more sin than scintillation about me."

"Oh, my God!"

"Quite," said Vivian slowly; "I see your point, I think; but seriously, Frank, what could she have meant by saying that we were 'on the edge of things' and that 'life must spill over soon, it was so full up'?"

"Was there nothing about a dark man in it," asked Frank, "or crossing the sea?"

"Don't be an idiot; but how can things change, how could life alter?"

"I am changing my tailor."

"Thank God," said Vivian. "That, of course, is a change, a big one," he admitted, "but still, honestly, I don't think it was quite what she meant. Now how could next year be any different? Won't there be the Derby and Ascot, and will the Ritz take wings? Is it conceivable that the Tallboys will not give their ball?"

"Inconceivable," said Frank.

"Very well then; how can next year be any different?"

"Perhaps," said Frank thoughtfully, "Miller will give us a new billiard-table at the club; but I doubt it. Have some whisky."

. . . . .

Now as all this unedifying conversation took place in the month of July in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and fourteen I can-

## MOCKBEGGAR

not but think that it afforded the Fates considerable amusement.

. . . . .

To the chambers of Mr. Hugh Whittinghame (but lately returned complete with pipe, papers, and bronzed appearance from the country), which are so closely situated to the blatant, vulgar noise of the Strand that you never cease to marvel how they contrive completely to escape it, there came on the very last day of July a most curious and astonishing succession of visitors. Now Hugh was that most wonderful of all hosts, the complete bachelor; and complete bachelors always know a lot more about women and their wants than do women themselves; that is why they are complete bachelors; so that when Hugh's first visitor was announced orders were immediately given for toasted scones (with very little butter), because they were a most particular weakness of Mrs. Macready, and the only one, as Vivian said, she was known to possess. And entrenched behind a toasted scone (with very little butter) Hugh steadily regarded that frail but upright figure, so uncompromising, so heartening. Mrs. Macready had kept for sixty years what very few people keep nowadays for sixteen—a respect for God and a sense of humour.

"Have you seen anything of Rachael lately?" she asked.

"Of Miss Massinger?"

"Rachael."

"Er—no; not much. I saw her last, I think, at the Weston's garden-party."

"It was there that she met young Dalmeny, wasn't it?"

"Vivian?"

"Dalmeny."

"Why, yes, I believe it was."

"I should have thought that you would be likely to verify your beliefs in regard to Rachael, Hugh."

"You have the privilege of age, Mrs. Macready," he smiled a little sourly.

"Of age?"

"Of comparative age, yes; directness."

"And I see you are going to exercise that of a boy."

"A boy?"

"Yes, a positive boy; sulkiness."

"No," she said quickly when both had finished laughing, because they were far too fast and understanding friends, these two, ever seriously to quarrel; and Hugh knew it as a tribute to himself that she consulted him in however offhand a manner about those things which interested her.

## MOCKBEGGAR

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"No, Hugh, don't misunderstand me; so many people are doing that now, and I find it very tiresome; but I am very much concerned about Rachael. She is so much the best of all our young girls, don't you think? Oh, yes, well, of course you do, I know that. And Dalmeny is a very troublesome boy; he really is a great big tiresome boy, is Vivian." ("Vivian," thought Hugh, but he hardly liked to say it.) "He has so much more than most, and he is trying to throw so much more away. Pass me a scone, please—one with very little butter. I do wish Vivian had been born without any money at all, and I wish his father had taken my advice and thrashed him soundly every month when he was a boy. One thing his father did give him, though, and that was manners. Vivian has kept his manners, which is more than the majority of young men of to-day have done. That is why I don't want him to lose his soul—or anybody else's."

"But what has he to do with Rachael?"

"That is precisely what I came here to find out."

"But how should I know? I don't follow Vivian about. Besides, he has been on a walking-tour for the past fortnight."

"Yes, a walking-tour; and it is curious that Rachael should have been on a motoring-tour,

too, isn't it? And," she said, "that she and Dalmeny should have had a very jolly little dinner-party at Mayfield together."

"How interesting. You do keep ahead with the news, Mrs. Macready. I have been much too busy to know what's going on."

"If everybody in the past had been as busy as you," said Mrs. Macready, "you would never have been born. Busy!"

Hugh looked at her for quite a long time in silence.

"If you knew as much about girls as you think you do, Hugh," she said, "you would be very frightened for Rachael; and if you knew as much about men as I do you would be more so."

"But—frightened?"

"Yes, frightened. Rachael will quite savagely and deliberately choose a second best, as the best itself is unobtainable."

"But I've never——"

"No, of course you haven't, you've been much too busy. I was busy, too, at your age, but I was busy finding the right person to love."

"But I'm nearly twenty-seven——"

"Prodigious age. I feel I could slap you. Busy! Yes, I expect you are," she said, "very busy indeed. Good afternoon, Miss Westlake. Try one of these excellent scones that Mr. Whit-

MOCKBEGGAR

tinghame makes so nicely." And so enter Hugh's second visitor, very much scared and disappointed at finding the formidable Mrs. Macready there. People of her stamp are always much more disliked by young women than by young men, but whether that is a commentary on the difference in honesty between the two sexes I do not know.

But Mrs. Macready, having—and it is a rare combination—as much tact as truth, chatted pleasantly while she swallowed the remaining scone, and then as pleasantly departed.

Hugh would have no servants in attendance on Mrs. Macready—for which they were devoutly thankful, she being of the old school and not subscribing to the present-day ideas on the subject—and he himself escorted her to the door.

"Did you bring a stick?"

"No, I did not bring a stick," she said. "I can get along without the use of props either material or moral."

"It only wants a little determination," she said, and she was gone; walking determinedly into the Strand, looking from behind, thought Hugh, exactly like the Victorian age, "and a jolly good age, too."

Hugh rang for fresh tea and more scones, not being *au fait* with Miss Westlake's particular

likes and dislikes. But on their arrival Miss Westlake would have none of them. She had, however, great need of a handkerchief, for she commenced immediately to cry copiously. So Hugh brought her a nice, large, sympathetic, sheety male handkerchief and waited patiently for the explanation of these extraordinary things; for, in his bachelorish wisdom, he knew that first of all a woman cries, and then she speaks in anger, then she has another smaller cry, a sort of gentle echo of the first, after that she expects you to kiss her, and then she goes away and spends hours wondering how much truth she has accidentally told you.

But when he caught a glimpse of Miss Westlake's face over the corner of the borrowed (and now saturated) sheet he stopped thinking that. "My dear girl," he said, "you look quite done up." (What a remark for a bachelor!)

She bit little shreds out of his handkerchief and nodded miserably at him, but she stopped crying.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Whittinghame——"

"Hugh," he corrected with a charming smile. "Everybody calls me Hugh. 'Mr. Whittinghame' makes me feel so ancient."

"Hu—Hugh then, I am so sorry."

"Not a bit. Everybody comes unstuck at times. Have a cup of tea."

"Thanks awfully. Do they? I suppose they do, but I don't think *anybody* could feel as I do now."

"Sugar? I've felt like that at times myself. Every one does, you know, and it does one no end of good to talk it all over."

"Oh, you don't mind my having come, then?"

"Not in the slightest; it is quite seriously an honour, but perhaps I shan't be much help."

"Oh, but you will, you will, I feel sure."

"It isn't anything about any of my friends, I suppose: I mean, it won't——"

"Oh, but it is; desperately so."

Hugh looked steadily at her for quite a long time. "Oh," he said, "—oh! And how does it all start?"

"You don't know my people?" asked Miss Westlake.

"I have not had the honour——"

"No." She laughed a little queerly. "No, you haven't. Do you know Mr. Philips, Mr. Lionel Philips?"

"Of the *Telegram*?"

"Um."

"Y-e-es; but how on earth does he come into it?"

Miss Westlake proceeded to explain "how on earth."

Now when a girl of her age, who should know as much of happiness as she should little of hell, pulls up her heart and begins to chew it thoughtfully into pieces in front of you the result is inclined to be illuminating, and even disconcerting.

The honour of knowing her parents, she explained, might regretlessly be forgone. Her parents, it seemed, had little money, and Mr. Philips had a lot. Here she was at some pains to point out the more obvious defects in Mr. Philips' character. Of all the middle-aged, degenerated, withered husks of men he appeared to be the worst. A rotting corpse of a man, she said. An oily, smearing, white-gloved corpse. A man who had forgotten much more than he had ever known of the decencies of life. And Mr. Philips, it appeared, was unmarried. So also, incidentally, was she.

"Ah," said Hugh at last, "may I smoke?"

She nodded. "God alone knows how close I have been to killing somebody, if only myself," she said.

Hugh smoked in silence and looked wise, but mainly he was thinking how extraordinary it was that one of whom he had been but dimly aware as a sort of decorative but demure background to things should be visited by such violent passions.

Which showed his conceit and his ignorance.

He felt a little out of his depth. "You see," he said, "I—I know so little of your people. Now if you went to Vivian Dal——"

"To Vivian Dalmeny . . . to *Vivian!* . . ." She laughed, and Hugh felt as if all his finger-nails had been torn off quickly.

"You may have heard of Rachael Massinger?"

Hugh admitted it. (Damn it, he thought, where is all my fatherly-confessor attitude?)

"Well, what's left of Viv—Mr. Dalmeny when he's finished admiring her wouldn't satisfy any girl however much she loved him."

And then Miss Westlake left quite suddenly.

"But, damn it," thought Hugh, "how does one deal with people like that?"

Later he thought: "Lionel Philips, eh? I don't wonder the kid's upset."

Now that, you might reasonably have supposed, was quite enough excitement for one day and as much unattached female company as was good for a serious but eligible young bachelor, and so did Hugh.

Just before dinner he did the first sensible thing that he had done since first Dorothy Westlake so unexpectedly had entered his room: he rang up Mrs. Macready and told her very carefully most of what had been said. And Mrs. Macready listened as carefully and then said that there were

more fools about than she had thought possible, and then rang off; and Hugh, glowing with that righteous sort of self-complacency that comes from having successfully palmed a job off on to somebody else was quite content to leave it at that.

Now it is a matter of regret to me that Hugh should first be seen by you in this light—a failure; because fundamentally he was sane and collected and helpful and sympathetic, but he could not cope (as he explained subsequently) with tragedies bursting in and out of his rooms like that. Generally he was quiet and reserved and not a little shy, and in the background of ballrooms and “all the life we lead” he always seemed to be noting and quietly observing, so that one lady always differentiated between him and Dalmeny thus—that “Hugh had been born a reporter, but Vivian only a retorter; and one,” she said, “makes money, but the other love.”

Hugh, now clothed and in the right mind that must always accompany a stiff shirt and a good dinner, chose his favourite pipe and settled down to a quiet evening. In that part of his brain that was not occupied by his work he even began to flatter himself—but it was his cook deceiving him—that he had not cut such a sorry figure in this

father-confessor business after all. Wine is a great healer.

Then must Parker walk in and announce, as if it were the most matter-of-fact thing in the world, that Miss Massinger was without; and close upon his heels, bidding no bidding, appeared Rachael herself like some clap of thunder that follows too closely on its preceding flash.

Now who shall tell you of Rachael—her dress and appearance that night? Such a dress it was that no pressman would ever report, because he could not understand it, and even if he could the sub-editor's regard for English morality would never let it live in print. And whether it was crushed-strawberry or running-wine colour I do not know; I only know that in a softness of shade quite unimaginable it drew a very fast and delicate line across her above which was the whiteness of Rachael.

Rachael was never flamboyant.

Anyhow it was a most unfair dress in which to visit a bachelor's rooms at half-past nine o'clock at night.

And in the subdued light from Hugh's reading-lamp Rachael's shoulders were like white shimmering satin.

Then Rachael threw her wrap carelessly over a chair and producing her curious green amber

cigarette-holder announced that she would smoke.

"Hugh," she said quite simply, "I have come," and Hugh looked at her and drew in one or two sharp little breaths.

"Hughie," she said, "what are you reading?" She half turned his book and read the title and, lo, it was Chitty's *Statutes*; Rachael laughed.

"Oh, Hughie, why, why, why do you always work? Aren't there things to enjoy in life; aren't there beautiful things in life? Am I not beautiful?"

"You are," said Hugh.

"I am beautiful," she said with even more terrible simplicity than before, "and, Hughie, I have come to you." She moved a little towards him.

"Are you still so desperately sure?"

And Hugh, now feeling desperately sure of nothing whatsoever, caught at her outstretched hand and said, "Oh, Ray, Ray, why *will* you . . . don't, don't. . . Look here, for goodness' sake let's sit down and talk it out."

And that, of course, was first round to Hugh and one that very few men would have won.

They sat down. "But I am desperately tired of talk," said Rachael. "My life is getting quite ridiculously full of it. The Almighty must think that He has made a lot of gramophone records

instead of human beings at times. I want to enjoy life, and you can't enjoy it by talking."

"Not in your way, I think, Rachael."

"What do you mean by 'my way'? It isn't my way; it's just the ordinary, normal, healthy way. I want to enjoy life by being human. Honestly, Hugh," she said, shaking her head, "I suspect you of middle-class origins at times."

That, of course, would make anybody laugh, so they both laughed.

Then her mood altered, and all the fire went out of her voice, that now was as soft and silvery as liquid starlight, and those arms, so like white shimmering satin, made a chain round his neck. "Oh, Hugh," she cried softly, "have you changed, dear? . . . You have changed. . . . Do you no longer love me?" And for a minute or two Hugh was quite animal enough for almost any woman's desires; and much avail winning Round One was to him now.

"Why cannot we always love one another like that, Hughie?" she cried. "What curious something is there in men that prevents them always from enjoying the things they love?"

"I've told you there is a way, Rachael. . . . We can get married. . . ."

"Oh, marriage. . . ."

"Well?"

"Marriage is so—so *committing*, Hugh . . . and such a sort of seal. . . ."

"But don't you want to be sealed?" he asked.

"Ah, but one is so much afraid of being sold. . . . Besides, I am so desperately young I could not possibly become respectable yet. . . ."

"We can wait. . . ."

"Oh, wait, wait, wait. Life isn't Clapham Junction, and, besides, what does one do in the meantime? I am a woman, you know."

This as a casual afterthought, but Hugh, so near her whiteness, so delicately ensnared in her perfume on the battleground of that divan, was most acutely aware of it.

"God knows," he said almost savagely, "I little want to wait, and I do think, Ray, that marriage is so much enjoying things together in youth, so much braving things side by side like children——"

"Oh, in God's name, then, let's marry and be respectable," cried Rachael. Which, when you come to think of it, was a very curious acceptance of a proposal; but Hugh was insisting strangely on his last words:

"—like children."

"Children . . . oh, *children* now."

"You know the difficulty, Ray; we've spoken of it futilely so often."

"But, dear man, are you *still* a Catholic?"

"I'm afraid so," he smiled wanly. "It's hardly a week-end religion, you know."

"Oh, it's much too moral to be that, I'm sure," said Rachael; which was nasty.

"But seriously, Hugh," she said, "it's too ridiculous; this is where you are much more animalistic than I am. Children are only unfortunate appendages to marriage. One would be all right, I suppose, but a dozen or more—why, however should I think of pretty names for them all? It's positively gross carelessness to have a whole *harvest* of children. Do, do, *do* be sensible about it all. How on earth could I remain nice and slim and Rachaelesque if all my spare time I spent presenting you with sons and heirs? Positively you would get tired of seeing me in bed and having nurses and doctors and things. I should keep thinking we were a turn in the music-hall. Your religion is so nice and thrilling about most things and so ridiculously pigheaded about this. I must write to the Pope about it positively."

Now that, of course, was a very funny remark, and it made Rachael laugh considerably, but Hugh it did not.

And Rachael's laugh made her forget the mood she had come in and which had gradually been changing since first she entered the room; a mood

DINNER à quatre IN MAYFIELD

which seizes on all women, and if in such a mood they meet with the Vivians of life then are they satisfied but unlucky, if with the Hughs then they are unsatisfied but on the whole lucky.

"Oh, Hughie," she cried, jumping up and catching up her wrap, "my silly old Hugh, we had better wait, we had better wait. Its like wandering through life expecting a tip from God, and honestly I don't believe we shall ever get it; but still if I tempted you," she cried, "you might fall; indeed, you would fall; and I should feel like Eve, and that would be so unoriginal.

"Exit," she said, "the vamp."

And all the whiteness and the perfume and the catching, compelling desirability of her was suddenly gone; her last delicate, almost imperceptible, insult being the slightest indication of the open book towards poor silent Hugh.

Wretched Chitty.

And Hugh, though he regarded him for quite an hour or more, saw never a word of Chitty or his *Statutes*.

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CHAPTER III

A MEMORABLE DINNER *chez* JOSEF

LORD TALLBOY being in Rupert Street—which was unusual for him—and likewise in a hurry—which was even more so—was rudely accosted.

“Hello, Tallboy,” said Vivian, “top of the morning.”

Now Eustace Stephen, Lord Tallboy, was brother-in-law to Dalmeny, having married Vivian’s sister Stephané, who announced at the wedding-breakfast that she had married him in order to escape furtherance of Vivian’s conversation, which, she alleged, was too dissipated and not sufficiently distracting.

Some said that Lord Tallboy was lucky in marrying Stephané, and these were they whom she had made love to and not kissed; but others affirmed that he was welcome to the baggage, and they were those whom she had kissed, but never made love to; but as there is always a divergence of opinion on any point, especially on a female one, nobody paid any attention, but went on admiring Stephané just as much as before.

A MEMORABLE DINNER

Stephané, of course, lived in Cadogan Gardens and had the greenest parrot in London.

"Tallboy," said Vivian, "how extraordinarily you are dressed." And in the middle of Rupert Street—a most unusual street for them both—he walked slowly two or three dozen times round Lord Tallboy, eyeing him carefully.

And Lord Tallboy was extraordinarily dressed.

He had on a hard, flat, circular hat.

A much-waisted coat.

His trousers stopped just below the knee (probably, as Vivian conjectured, because his tailor had no more of that extraordinary stuff on hand, and a good job too); below, his legs were wound about with incredible intricacies of cloth. All over him were blödges of brightness.

"Either," said Vivian, "you are going to judge cattle at Islington (but in that case where is your straw?) or else you must be the commissionaire at the new picture palace in Leicester Square, and in that case where is your *embonpoint*? But perhaps commissionaires don't have *embonpoint* this year—I forget, I'm sure; and in either case you are, of course, mad; not that that is at all uncommon in our degenerate aristocracy these days. *Vive la Révolution* and so forth." (This quite startled a passing constable, who having been bitten four times recently by an angry suffragette

was nervous.) "But fancy Stephané letting you out like that. Has she gone mad too?"

"What about a spot of lunch?" said Lord Tallboy, knowing his Vivian.

"Splendid. But nowhere decent, of course, like that."

"We will lunch at my club, if they let you in."

"Conditions fulfilled," said Vivian; "fire ahead."

Vivian, having reached that stage in luncheon where one does gaze round and reflect, duly gazed round and reflected. He was astonished to see quite a considerable number of people dressed exactly as was Lord Tallboy (whom, by the way, he insisted on calling Hobo, being convinced—as he said—that the name was pronounced that way).

"What is all this?" he asked. "A disguise against suffragettes?"

"This," said Lord Tallboy, "is a war. Coffee?"

"Good gracious me," Vivian cried, "a war, a real, live, gory war? Yes, please."

"And what," he asked, "is this gory war all about? Are we annexing Russia or merely preventing the Irish from invading Ireland?"

"My dear idiot, haven't you read any papers at all lately?"

A MEMORABLE DINNER

"Papers? Never read 'em. I hate to think that I have a superior in anything—even lying; but seriously is this *the* war, *der Tag*, and so forth?"

"It is," said Tallboy; "it's going to be a glorious bust-up. People say we may want half a million more men yet."

"Half a million?"

"Possibly. You had better come along with our crowd. I can get you in."

"Splendid. Shall we fight and so forth?"

"I shouldn't be at all surprised if we did," said Tallboy.

"You see," he said apologetically, "I am a soldier."

"Why, so you are," cried Vivian, "I had forgotten that; of course, you're always running off to these manœuvres and things when we want you for shooting. You served in South Africa, didn't you?"

"Just a bit," said Tallboy softly; "oh, just a little bit."

• Had Vivian known anything of the military decorative scheme the lurid effect on Tallboy's aristocratic, but somewhat emaciated, breast might have expanded that "just a bit" considerably.

“And shall I have to wear clothes like that?”

“You will.”

“What, with all those buttons and stars and things scattered about?”

“Well,” said Tallboy, “perhaps you won’t start with quite so many stars, but don’t let that bother you; everything else will be pretty much the same.”

“How very nasty,” said Vivian, eyeing him distastefully.

But Tallboy, knowing his Vivian, laughed and paid the bill and left. Nor let Vivian’s remarks mislead you; he was not in the slightest degree dismayed by having to wear clothes like Lord Tallboy’s, which were very well cut and became their wearer admirably; he was only intensely jealous that so many people in *le beau monde* had stolen a march on him and that for once he was so ridiculously out of fashion. From Lord Tallboy he hurried to his tailor, who though he had a thousand other shrouds on order had, as always, a preferential hearing for the gay and open-handed Mr. Dalmeny.

Chickie was disturbed rather late that evening by his telephone; and not even the metallic impersonality of that horror could keep all the gaiety out of Vivian’s voice.

A MEMORABLE DINNER

"Sorry to ring up so late, Chickie," he said, "but Frank wouldn't let me before. He said it would be no good as you were sure to be outside Buckingham Palace singing 'God save the King.' Were you?"

"Not exactly, but I heard them."

"How thrilling. I was going to say something quite dreadfully important, but—oh, yes. Look here, Chickie," said Vivian, "over a very considerable portion of Western Europe a thing called a War is raging; can we let it rage all alone or shall we go along and rage with it?"

"I thought of having a shot at it——"

"Stout fellow. Frank, who is now making an atrocious noise in my ear, and I are going in with Tallboy's crowd; he's getting us all commissions. Can you come along?"

"Thanks very much, I should love to——"

"Splendid. I'll tell Tallboy. I shall now sharpen my sword. See you to-morrow."

The born leaders of men, you observe, gravely undertaking their responsibilities.

.

That was the Beginning of the War; and a very good beginning too, as everybody admitted. In due course, or as it seemed to some in undue course, certain great military men in France be-

came desirous of the company of our now war-like friends.

"We shall steal away in the middle of the night," said Vivian, "to a destination unknown to nobody but ourselves."

"And since," he said, "nobody could possibly go stealing about in the middle of the night while sober it behoves us appropriately to befit ourselves for the occasion."

So there was a dinner. Nay, a Dinner—for this was quite a memorable occasion, this farewell dinner of those fine and careless men. Only Josef, of course, and the Restaurant Fantastique were capable of dealing with it.

There, solicitously shepherded by Josef, who looked, as Vivian said, like a Scottish laird with a dash of imagination, were hilariously gathered together several ladies and gentlemen.

Of ladies Rachael the quite incomparable, Stephané the irrepressible, and Dorothy Westlake the inevitable.

Of gentlemen Vivian the gay, Chickie the serious, Frank the disillusioned, Hugh the sombre. Tallboy was absent, being busily engaged, Vivian explained, in conducting something called a war "to which we are all most desperately bound; and I do hope," he said, "that that terribly efficient

A MEMORABLE DINNER

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person doesn't finish said war before we arrive at same."

I think that Josef, who happened to know something of a positively prehistoric year called 1870, looked just a little sorrowfully towards that merry company; but if he stood gazing in abstraction on them for a moment or two be very sure that he turned sharply on his underlings, bidding them hurry to bring the very best that the Fantastique could offer (and that was very good indeed), which alone was worthy of such a gathering.

. . . . .

It was with a certain amount of sombre diffidence that Hugh attended the feast; he felt, being confronted by Rachael and Dorothy Westlake, something like a father confessor with twins, and of his natural good breeding he was somewhat shy; but Rachael, showing no signs of remembering their unusual interview, would have none of it.

"Hugh," she said, "looks strategically."

"Quite the little Gunner, ain't he?" said Vivian; "but then all Gunners always look worried; it's wondering where they've left their guns, I think.

"Besides," he said, "Hugh is the sort of person whom everybody goes and worries; he's a sort of moral quartermaster——"

"What on earth do you mean?" cried

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Vivian said, "if this sort of thing goes on Chickie will some day totally eclipse me, and that would be tragic"; Chickie having eaten half his weapon was forced almost immediately to capitulate.

"It is a pity," said Rachael, "that no military men are civilized; from henceforth I shall patronize the Navy."

"That sounds breezy," said Vivian, arranging his tie, "but what about this wishing business? Miss Westlake, won't you start?"

"I wish," said Dorothy, performing the prescribed rite, "that you may be as lucky in war as you have been in—in everything else."

"But that is very charming," said Vivian. "Thank you very much. And now, Rachael——"

"No, no," cried Dorothy Westlake, "it must be a man next." She pushed the salt-cellar towards Vivian. "We must go alternately."

"I wish," Vivian said after profound thought, "that my tennis service may be improved; it's really been very bad lately, you know. Coffee, Josef."

Stephané wished that brothers were as nice as husbands—"that is, other people's," she explained somewhat ambiguously.

Frank wished that Josef would bring some liqueurs and could not be prevailed upon to wish anything else, maintaining, rather coarsely, that

## A MEMORABLE DINNER

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a dinner without liqueurs was like a dress-suit without trousers—unfinished.

Then it was Rachael's turn, and very pretty she looked with thumb and forefinger poised delicately, and the dark head inclined in half mock-seriousness. "I wish," she said, "that you will all come back soon, because, dear, dear men, I do think that you are very, very sweet and whatever I—whatever we shall do without you I cannot possibly imagine." And as Rachael looked at everybody with her lovely and luminous eyes there fell a little silence upon them, for Rachael's eyes were like that—they could make you suddenly feel the ghastly futility of the witty remark that trembled on your tongue.

"And I," said Chickie after a pause, "wish that that Josef's damned Heidseick wasn't so heady."

"Splendid," cried Vivian. "I suspected that Chickie's was bottled brilliance; mine, of course, is on draught. And now that we have all wished——"

"No," Rachael said, moving the salt-cellar, "we haven't. Hughie——"

Hugh emerged from his obscurity of observation and stretched a thin brown hand across the table. "I wish," he said, dipping his fingers into the salt and looking a little fixedly before him,

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“that we may not have to wait long for a decision.”

“Quite the little patriot,” said Frank.

But Stephané cried, “Why, Hugh, you never threw any over your shoulder, and it was you who upset it.”

“Oh, well,” he laughed, “I’m not superstitious.”

From the Fantastique it was but a natural step to La Comique, and at La Comique was Miss Hetty Prince, now, of course, in khaki and much more swaggeringly charming than ever. Even Chickie was impressed by her, and Rachael professed anxiety for his morals.

Frank waxed fluent on the subject of music-halls and their inherent Christianity. Churches and music-halls were, he somewhat surprisingly maintained, interchangeable in their functions; in fact, he was of the opinion that the original intentions of the Creator in regard to them had become obscured and mixed.

“Consider,” he urged, “their tremendous similarity: the services at both end with a hymn; we pay seat rents in each; the limelight is much more effective than cumbersome coloured glass. Even the conventional colours of the altar have a wonderful counterpart in the more strictly conventional colours of the stage; in fact the staginess

## A MEMORABLE DINNER

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of the church is as nothing compared to the churchiness of the stage. The comedian's red nose——"

"Quite," said Vivian with determination. "But I say, hasn't Josef done us well!"

"Nose—I dwell with insistence on this point——"

"What do you mean," asked Vivian, "by 'dwell with insistence'? How does one 'dwell with insistence'?"

"How extraordinary; it sounds like marrying a suffragette; but do go on."

"I have forgotten the rest," Frank said vaguely. "Just look at Hetty."

And we looked at Hetty; there was about her that obvious abandonment of all things restraining, that subtly suggested laughter at the prudencies of life that is at the base of all successful appeals from the music-hall stage. She initiated a conspiracy against correctitude into which every man present felt himself especially invited to enter. To every man she was the embodiment of something which might never be quite improperly completed without him, to every woman of something which if she chose she might herself do incomparably better.

Then from the blackness of the back of the box Hugh made a very penetrating remark. "All

women on the stage," he said, "like girls riding in the Park, achieve their success by giving a most realistic presentation of something which isn't there."

To which profundity Vivian said, "Quite"; but Rachael, "Stuff and nonsense."

So to a merry end and back in an hilarious whole to Half Moon Street, where the question of farewells was to be considered; Vivian, after his gallant fashion, would have nothing but to bend low over Rachael's outstretched hand to take his leave with a courtier's kiss. Nor was there any of the rest but followed suit.

And I do think that the tried and tolerant god who presides over that romantic street looked down in sad amusement upon these his darlings; for here was a strange sight, here were men taking their gallant leave of what had most ensnared and held them in all their curious unproductive ways, here were men saying a sad farewell to what they most should need in all the dreary days to come.

Always my fondest memory of that quaint street shall be that of those careless, cultured, mannered men, of that high and haughty lady. . . .

## A MEMORABLE DINNER

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For exactly one year and nine months from the date of that memorable dinner Rachael was of the opinion that a war was most excellent fun. War, she said, consists in selling to other people what you would far sooner not keep for yourself, and then sending the proceeds to charity. And as no costume whatever, no matter how efficiently designed for work, could do anything but act as an admirable foil to Rachael's beauty, and as she liked trying them all on, she belonged to quite an amazing number of things in a very short time.

"War seems to consist," she argued again, "of men being brave abroad and women being charming at home. And a very fair division, too; besides, where else could men be brave but abroad or women charming but at home?"

But when the War had been won so many times in the halfpenny Press (which by then, of course, had risen to the dignity of the penny Press) that it seemed as if some real fighting must be going on after all Rachael was visited of a Doubt. A Doubt that came home with her one afternoon from a committee meeting of the Society for Distributing Aitches among Provincial Mayors, that watched her take off her rakish, close-fitting hat (with those pretty curls peeping from underneath like two large black diamonds), that most annoyingly sat opposite to her during dinner and

then calmly accompanied her to the theatre. A Doubt, indeed, that put its feet up on the mantelshelf and made itself at home.

Said Rachael to the Doubt in half-hearted, lame defence, "But I do no end of war-work as it is."

"Your war-work," said the Doubt, "is like the Holy Roman Empire——"

"Quite," said Rachael snappishly; "don't bother to elaborate; and now I am going to undress, so please go away."

But the Doubt seemed quite easy as to its morals and rudely remained.

Then Rachael sat in charming disorder in her room and began to be very unhappy. And though there were at least three presentable young men in London at that hour who would have grieved to hear of her being alone in her bedroom and more especially of her being so and sorrowful, and would have been most obligingly willing to remedy those defects, yet would she have no comfort of them, preferring rather to take counsel of a large woollen rabbit sitting by her bed, saying—for she had grown somewhat cynical—that Ambrose (which was the rabbit's name) was less irritable than a man and, under the circumstances, far safer.

Now Ambrose was the recipient of most delicate intimacies, and if Rachael spoke to him

## A MEMORABLE DINNER

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it was a sure sign that she was greatly moved.

And Rachael, a most presentable and self-possessed young woman of twenty-four, sound in mind and body (if any of us have been sound in mind or body since 1914) confided to a woollen rabbit, crying abandonedly over it, that she was miserable; but she said "*J'en ai soupée*" so that Ambrose might not know how bad it was.

And presently when she had finished crying and had kissed Ambrose as a reward for his comfort she sat down to write a letter.

In which letter she said to Hugh:

. . . And I do think that it is ridiculous and unfair that now when we are all meant to be enjoying ourselves so much we should be so dispersed; you and Chickie and Frank floundering in mud (and Vivian Dalmeny, of course!), and I floundering in Mayfair.

For I have been floundering desperately, I discovered that to-night.

Dear Hugh, I just have not done one single thing worth doing since that extraordinary time when people came and went as they willed, and all you dear people were always about.

Tell Vivian that I have been foremost of all the Gadarene swine (he will understand that, and it will be to his comfort, because he is wicked), but for *your* comfort you may know that I have decided to cease being headlong and to become long-headed; in fact, I am going to seek a job. A JOB, my dear.

## MOCKBEGGAR



My business ability, of which you have no idea, is quite amazing, and I shall place it at the disposal of the Government or whoever else will pay me better; so please do not expect such beautiful newsy and scandalously letters as hitherto I have sent you, because I, Rachael, shall be too busy. . . .

And on the whole that was not bad news for a lonely outpost to receive of the siege of Mansoul in Half Moon Street.

At this time there were in England a fanatical sect of people doing homage to a new God, and for his worship was erected just beyond the Admiralty Arch an imposing temple. The contractor—being paid a percentage on expenditure—was converted and flourished in the faith.

This new God was Organization; and it possessed—in common with all gods—the inestimable advantage of being utterly incomprehensible; for some said that in order to please it you should sit at a small desk, overlooking all, and entirely surrounded by telephones; but others said that all you wanted was a large desk in the basement with nothing on it and two revolving chairs. And, they added, some plain foolscap. Rachael, after close inquiry, said that the root and basis of all organization consisted in securing the minimum number of useful answers from the maximum

## A MEMORABLE DINNER

number of busy people, which were then filed in alphabetical order and afterwards indexed numerically.

That was later, of course, when she had been in the temple for some time; and this particular temple, it appeared, was that of the Ministry of National Organization.

Attached to which Ministry there was, of course (for secretive purposes), a Publicity Department, and attached to that Department, in a special sanctum and sanctuary, set apart for their exclusive use, was the Intelligence Branch.

To which Branch, and beautifying it as a fragrant creeper might a tree, clung Rachael.

The two principal questions exercising the minds of the Intelligence Branch at the time were the momentous ones of the Synchronization of Office Naps (a delicate point) and the Prolongation of Office Tea; but as Rachael was not in the habit of afternoon naps and did not share the common office taste in tea she was felt to be beyond the help of either organization or intelligence, and so was speedily promoted to the Chief's office.

Which said Chief was quite a considerable person, and none less than the mighty Mr. Philips.

Mr. Lionel Philips of the *Telegram*.

"Mr. Lionel Philips," said Rachael once, "has

a very surprising knowledge of human nature—for a pig.”

Mr. Philips was efficient, and shrewd, and wealthy, and quite lamentably ignorant, and his trousers were creased down the side. He was, in fact, exactly the sort of person for whom the O.B.E. was created. He was in charge of all the Ministry of Organization and in particular of the Intelligence Branch; but he was so busy doing things at the Ministry that he did not have overmuch time to slip across (as he called it) to the Intelligence Branch to find out what it was that he had been doing.

Allied with Mr. Philips in his Ministry was one Jacob B. Stetson, who was an even greater person than Mr. Philips (who, by the way, was commonly known in the office as Puss-in-boots); and Rachael felt sorry for Jacob B. Stetson—he was so successful and so short-winded and so obviously terrified of his wife.

Rachael would take down Puss-in-boot's letters at his wheezy, jerky dictation and feel very sorry for the King's English, and then she would type-write them out and feel even sorrier for it, because what Mr. Philips had not murdered she would mutilate; but Mr. Philips seemed quite satisfied with the result—at any rate, he never troubled to get another secretary.

## A MEMORABLE DINNER

Mr. Philips was not such a fool as you thought he was.

Not by any means.

You have been expecting for instance, the inevitable invitation to dinner; so almost was Rachael, but it never came.

He did once suggest to Rachael that they might have some tea together, but even that daring was partly excused by the quite inexplicable feeling of comradeship which springs up between two people voluntarily working overtime together. And Rachael took her lovely eyes from her papers for a moment, when she was busy being somebody's obedient servant, and looked at Mr. Philips, his fatness and his grossness, his wrinkles and his rings; she was, it appeared, not in the habit of going to meals with people she hardly knew, but would he care to come on Sunday and have tea with her?

Mr. Philips was not in the habit of receiving invitations from his lady clerks, but he had the sense not to say so; and where did she live?

"Half Moon Street," ruminated Philips, thinking the matter over with timid anticipatory relish later. . . .

"Half Moon Street, eh?"

And to Half Moon Street Mr. Philips duly

went and from there duly returned, and what took place in the interim was never made public.

All that Rachael said was, "Mr. Philips is not brilliant in conversation; no, by no means brilliant, but he has a vast amount of coarse sense."

And after that she went on thumping a typewriter on his behalf, because she rather admired him for his frank attempt to get from her what he wanted and his frank recognition of the fact that, by him, it was unattainable.

There were letters, of course, from her company abroad—"Rachael's Own," as somebody dubbed them. One from Vivian, for instance:

"This is not a War, it's a Bore; and I shall ask for my money back soon if something don't happen. And please, Rachael, don't say *anything* in your letters ever again about Ascot or the Ritz or even London—because they just don't exist. Life consists entirely of *La Vie Parisienne* and Mud (whether that's allegorical of Heaven and Hell goodness only knows), and one is quite futilely inflamed by the one and quite desperately engulfed by the other. Chickie and Hugh are performing wonders. . . . They are actually good soldiers. . . . Both certainly can recognize all the ranks up to Field-Marshal, and Chickie has even read

## A MEMORABLE DINNER

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some of the hideous military books that seem to be an indigenous growth here.

"He, of course, is quite serious enough for soldiering, and it suits him admirably. His account on the Day of Judgment will certainly go in in triplicate—though what he'll put on it God alone knows; I have done my best to lead him astray, but he seems incapable of being at all 'butterflyish' in life.

"I tried in long and learned argument the other night to convince him of the folly of his ways, but although I got quite three sheets in the wind in the attempt he remained invincible in his dullness.

"Hugh gave me a message from you the other day, and, Rachael, you dear, divine, and utterly incredible Person, sea-water is very nice, you know, and I daresay these little pigs enjoyed their bathe. Sagacious swine, weren't they? And do you *ever* know when I'm serious and when I'm not? . . ."

What Rachael thought of that letter I do not quite know. Perhaps she thought it a cruel mercy that Vivian was where he was; perhaps she reflected with sadness on the seeming impossibility of being sagacious without being swine; or did she merely wonder whether Vivian's confusion of "sagacious" and "salacious" was inevitable?

Very brave letters she wrote to her company in

## MOCKBEGGAR

France—Rachael the lovely, who was now so lonely, so tired of being admired by second-rate people, so desirous of “a gesture in life.”

“You must hold Half Moon Street,” Vivian wrote to her, “as a very citadel against all the nasty people who are going to be rich when this ’ere gory War is over, and when we’re all together again we will sally forth (Chickie says that’s right) from it in raids of decent manners and tolerable conversation on all their beastly barbarianism. I think, Rachael, that even a middle-class mayor might see something somewhat striking about you. . . .” Very brazen was Vivian’s love-making in those letters of his to Rachael, and very near to her heart were they in a wilderness of vulgar stares. . . .

There was Rachael’s luncheon with the spare and spruce Lord Tallboy.

“Where,” asked Tallboy, “shall we lunch? Where does one lunch nowadays?”

“We lunch at a place,” Rachael said, “which is still civilized.”

“Are there waitresses there?” Lord Tallboy asked.

“None.”

“Do they play jazz music?”

“Never.”

“Does everybody drink champagne?”

"Nobody."

"Gad, it must be Paradise."

"It is better," Rachael said, "as being more immediately attainable; it is La Fantastique."

And to the Fantastique they went.

There while they ate a meagre meal Rachael gladly suffered the illusion that her world was once more about her.

Tallboy spoke little of wounding and killing and all the soldiers' somewhat gruesome stock-in-trade—he never believed in talking shop—but he paid a compliment to Rachael which possibly no other man would have paid and certainly no other woman deserved.

"All men," he said, "fight much more readily for a picture than for a principle; that's why we have flags and things, of course; and I think that is why you have made such jolly fine soldiers of those three, Rachael——"

"Those *three*?"

"Vivian and Martindale and that other fellow Wilson somebody. . . ."

"Ah, Chickie. Those three . . . but *I*—have *I* done anything?"

"You do much more than you could possibly imagine, Rachael. . . ."

"Perhaps," said Rachael, somewhat moved by

the wine, "they each carry my likeness next their heart; how dreadfully romantic."

Lord Tallboy said nothing, being quite sure that two of them did.

"And are they good soldiers?"

"Vivian's the best officer," Tallboy answered in his businesslike way. "Though the least soldier-like in many respects, the men really do worship him. There is something about a cheerful heathen which seems to appeal to everybody."

"And Chickie? This must make you feel like a confidential report."

"The best all-round regimental officer we have; he hasn't enough imagination to be miserable and not enough bumptiousness to be a nuisance as Vivian is at times; give me Vivian for a sortie, but Wilson for a siege any day."

"So I have a heathen and a dullard to my credit so far," Rachael smiled. "I must be a poor mis—teacher; but I teach people only to be happy, I think. Have you come across the Gunners at all?"

"Gunners? Place swarms with 'em. Why?"

"Has it ever swarmed with the —th Battery?"

"But how extraordinary, I have only just lef—o-oh, Major Whittinghame?"

"I know such a one," admitted Rachael.

"Hugh, in fact, good old Hugh?"

## A MEMORABLE DINNER

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"Hugh Whittinghame, is it? Perhaps it is; and have I—is *he* a good soldier?"

"Not a better in France," said Tallboy.

"A success," cried Rachael, smiling with her dark and lovely eyes, "a success at last."

"But you," said Tallboy, "have not made him a soldier, Rachael; you have made him a slave."

Following upon which there was a considerable silence.

"Well," Rachael said at last, "slaves are very nice and comfortable things to have about one; and I do think, Eustace Stephen, Lord Tallboy, that you should not adopt so haughty a tone in the matter, seeing that I had positively to emancipate you from my thrall before you might marry *Stephané*."

"That," laughed the noble lord in defeat, "is perfectly true, Ray; you really are much too lovely for us men, and very sorry indeed I am for poor Hugh——"

"Poor Hugh!" Rachael's echo was like a wind that rustled among fallen rose-leaves. "But poor Rachael, my lord, an it please you, so utterly beset by doubt."

And my lord, sensing that Rachael was walking softly through her house of dreams and all the spacious chambers of her heart, and knowing something of the intriguing intricacies thereof,

most wisely summoned Josef. And he having paid the bill, together they departed, that lean and diplomatic nobleman, that lovely lady cast about with thought.

Which things were remembered and pondered in the heart of Rachael as she sat, a lonely queen surrounded by a carelessly abdicated toilet, her only light a single tall and silver candle.

And in the light from that dim beacon Rachael was visited of an Illusion.

And this was the manner of it:

The high session of the day being ended, she was straightway aware of a stranger within the court chamber of her heart, and where throughout the brilliant day the gay courtiers Hope and Laughter, the merry monarch Mirth, the irrepressible jester Wit, had moved their courtly, gallant ways now stood this sombre stranger, who said curiously:

"Dust soon accumulates."

"Dust," cried Rachael in scorn, "in my heart? Why, how impossible!" and had it not been for the faintest suggestion of dust on the red floor of that chamber she must have convinced herself.

"Dust," said the stranger, "soon accumulates in lonely places."

"Lonely—here? At least I have my thoughts."

## A MEMORABLE DINNER

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"A sorry company, madam. Where are they now?"

"They are not here," Rachael said slowly, feeling strangely impelled towards the truth; "not here: they are away."

"But, Rachael, they are here," cried the stranger, "they are here; see, I have them!"

And well might he be sombre for, lo he was Hugh, standing a very small and suppliant figure against the crimson drapery of her heart, a very large and looming shadow before the light of her sudden illumination.

"But, Hugh," she cried, "Hughie, this is desperate. Never have I felt like this before, as it were straightened, I who was always so free, so untrammelled. And, dear Hughie, to all the men, the dear, dear men, who have always so admired me and with whom I have always been so happy, not to one of them have I ever spoken of Love. Because I thought, you know," she explained with an apologetic little smile to the ghostly figure in her heart, "that it would come to me as it seems to come to everybody. I thought that it just happened like dancing, and putting up one's hair, and coming out, and dining at Josef's. I thought it would come up and say, 'I am something that you have not explored; please explore me, I'm such fun,' and I, Rachael, who explore all things

## MOCKBEGGAR

and exploit all men, would duly explore it; and, Hughie, it hasn't been a bit like that, oh, not a bit.

"I do think that one should know about these things; I mean, aren't there manuals of instruction and so forth on the subject? Because Love has gone away from me all the time; chase him howsoever hard I might, he has ever evaded me, and when I catch him up he does not want to be surveyed at all, but rather served, I think.

"And lo, again, when I catch him up it is only you, you, my dear old simple Hughie, nothing more romantic than that; which now I think the most wonderful thing in the world; and if ever Rachael, the silly, impetuous child, was scornful of your fine humility, or irritable of your splendid patience, I, now, Rachael the Woman, am supremely sorry for it. If ever Rachael the fastidious held aloof from the physical directness of life, I, now, Rachael the Woman, am passionately desirous of being quite completely consummated. If ever Rachael the proud let you occasionally salute her hand, now, I, Rachael the poor, am humbly desperate that you, dear Hughie, should take my lips and know the kisses of your lover. . . ."

And long after the figure in her heart had

## A MEMORABLE DINNER

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faded, the solitary candle gutted, and the letter to Hugh been signed, sealed, and stamped, did Rachael sit in palest moonlight lonely amid her silver luxuries.

"Now," she thought, feeling the need of it, "I will smoke a cigarette"; and she felt in the long, narrow silver cigarette-box which once Lord Tallboy, in the pre-Stephané period, had given her as a birthday present.

And in the act she remembered that there were in the box cigarettes both Turkish and Virginian, intermixed quite hopelessly in a truly Rachael-esque manner. "But," she cried delightedly to Ambrose, "this is a very godsend; it shall be an omen, this, for never have I been in such doubt before, I, Rachael the decided; and certainly it is a very extraordinary feeling to have taken one's heart out and sealed it in an envelope and to be posting it to a man—and yet—an omen it must be; now should I draw Turkish, why, that is voluptuous and luxurious and well accords with Rachael the *bonne-vivante*, the vamp; but a Virginian (though its first syllable, she thought with a mischievous little laugh, be incongruous) is redolent of restraint and cleanness and all the dear Spartanism of my Hughie. Oh, Ambrose, watch——"

And Rachael, staring at a small Virginian

## MOCKBEGGAR

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cigarette, forgot to light it; but Ambrose, that woolly wiseacre, watching with beady eyes a bulky envelope which now might make a lonely Gunner in Flanders the happiest, most unassailable man alive, was hugely delighted.

CHAPTER IV

VISIONARIES *take the* CHAMELEON'S DISH

AT 6.43 in the evening of the 7th of September in the year of Disgrace One there was in the city of London, or, to speak more accurately, in the bowels of that city, a west-bound train about to stop at Piccadilly Circus Station. To say the passengers inside were packed like sardines in a tin would be quite inexcusably trite; one had much better liken them (bearing out the simile) to fishes in a miraculous draught. At least, within one of the coaches so thought one particular person now on her way home to dinner, but, of course, that was essentially a time when people thought strange things, and so perhaps she may be excused. For this was that strange year 1918 when Europe had lapsed from her splendid outburst of chivalrous sanity, the last leaping flame of that great fire of the chivalrous years that once illuminated her, to the blind and awful business of being sane, of settling up, when all the decent men who had done decent things found it too much trouble to go on doing them and much more fun to sit back and watch the professional cads dis-

MOCKBEGGAR

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playing their ignorance of men and manners; and when it was still a matter of debate as to whether the actual winner of the War was Mr. George or Mr. Pohocates P. Pepper, the chewing-gum king (which debate Mr. P. P. Pepper claimed to have been won in his favour, pointing out that it was only after a considerable expenditure of vocal energy that Mr. George was able to convince even the more hungry of his compatriots that they were heroes, whereas no good American needed any demonstration of the point at all).

This sudden ending of the War was quite a serious business for many; it was the very devil of a blow for Colonel Repington, who, owing to his strenuous efforts to win it, was quite a dozen pages behind in his diary; and Mr. Bottomley, it is said, wept copiously when destroying his stereotype "Over by Christmas."

There were one or two women up and down England who professed to be glad of it, but then women are curious creatures and on occasions will profess to be glad of anything.

There was one woman, riding in that train, who had not at that time the vaguest idea whether she was glad of it or not. Or rather she had a very vague idea that she was glad. And that was strange, because of all people she was most seldom visited of vague ideas, being noted for a knowl-

edge of her desires and a determination to achieve them.

Opposite her sat a very large man, who at all points quite cheerfully overflowed his clothes; and his face was large and childish and tolerant and amused; and on his knees, as on those of some sleepy benevolent god, rested an evening paper.

And Rachael fell mechanically to playing her favourite game of Upsidedownia, which she alleged to be the only possible excuse for travelling in a public vehicle and at which she had become extraordinarily proficient; and quite fluently she read the inverted headlines of his paper.

And when she had read them carefully once or twice she was seized of the conviction that they were rather more amusing inverted than otherwise; indeed she began to wonder if there were any such thing as the right way up or upside down, and how future dullards prodding about our fossilized remains will know the right way and the wrong of those curious little symbols, and how present dullards prodding about the fossilized remains of others, once so much alive, so moving, could possibly know top from bottom. "Of course," she argued with herself, "with illustrations it is different; a man's head is obviously his head, for instance; but, even then, how do we know that men didn't go about on their heads, or

that they *don't*"—which was a quaint thought to be running in the mind of an almost dangerously well-dressed lady seated in a Piccadilly-bound car, and it should serve to show you how deceptive are appearances.

Rachael's eyes moved from the headlines to the head above them; and it was an astonishing head, for it gave the impression for all the world as if the moon had got tired of being stared at by uncomprehending atoms and sung about by unastronomical idiots and, having suddenly sprouted a huge body and two ridiculously stumpy legs, had jumped down on to the earth and was wandering about grinning amiably, but without much comprehension, at everybody.

Well might it lack comprehension in these days. And Rachael regarding him thought of Mr. London (for her reading was extensively peculiar rather than peculiarly extensive; and her mind worked on the best Pelman principles) and of dynamite and of explosives in general; of explosives and their devastating effect on things; and then curiously of a room, a room not large but luxurious, peopled in another age by a woman and a man . . . and before her dreamy, liquid eyes the moon-face opposite her changed gradually into an amiable elephant, a monstrosity with burning eyes, eyes that gradually blazed and blazed and blazed

into the brilliant lights of that small but luxurious room.

None other than the room of Rachael herself in Half Moon Street, to which not twelve months ago had come a swaggering soldier, a man as outspoken in his attacks on the conventions as he was scrupulous in his observance of them.

"Vivian," cried Rachael, running to him and taking his hands, "you being from another world!"

"There must be a shocking shortage of manna," Vivian said, "if angels get as hungry as I am; please, Rachael, secure me a prodigious tea."

And, of course, a prodigious tea was secured, and none less than Otter himself, who in a mysterious, superior sort of way evaded all efforts of various Ministries to make him useful, saw to its arrangement.

But Vivian very speedily saw to its disarrangement, and in her pleasure, and quite unconscious of its incongruity, Rachael sat and watched that degrading sight, a man feeding.

"I have fourteen days' leave beginning yesterday," said Vivian, "and I have wired to-day for an extension, which will not be granted, but which I shall take.

"And Rachael, dear," he said, "please just sit there and go on looking like Rachael, because it

is quite incredible that you really exist, and I have to tell everybody exactly what you look like."

"But what a compliment," cried Rachael, "and how is everybody?"

"And don't," Vivian pleaded, "talk about the War, because it is now quite incredible that that exists" (and all the time he was wondering how much longer he could go on being a successful coward).

"It doesn't," Rachael cried. "Oh, Vivian, all those beastly things can't exist; some horrible bogey has taken all my dear friends away, but now one of them is returned, and he and Rachael shall enjoy themselves tremendously. We will," she said, "quite utterly illusion ourselves by first dining *chez* Josef and thence going to the play——"

"But——"

"No buts," she cried. "If your life becomes a stuttering succession of buts, Vivian Dalmeny, I shall despair utterly; it may all be horribly unpatriotic, but it's pleasant, and you are the first civilized man I have seen for a very long time.

"And how," she asked, "are all the other civilized men?"

"Oh—they are all—they are all right—Chickie and Frank, you know—splendid, in fact. I was most strictly charged to do their duties towards

## THE CHAMELEON'S DISH

you and most desperately to give you their love——”

“Dear, dear Chickie,” Rachael cried, “and dear Frank; and,” Rachael asked, “Hugh?”

There was a little silence.

“Hugh,” Vivian said in a thoughtful sort of way, “is dead. You see, he was killed yesterday.”

After a while Rachael echoed him in manner just as thoughtful, and looking rather absently before her, “Hugh,” she said slowly, “is—is dead; he was killed yesterday. Oh, Christ——”

And Vivian, now the complete and futile coward, could offer no more comfort than on his knees by Rachael, and so serious as to be almost sincere, to say, “Oh, Ray, I *am* sorry. Devilish sorry, old girl. It’s the first of our little lot, your own, you know, and oh, so quite the best. I’m sorry, Ray, he was such a jolly man.”

A not inglorious epitaph—“He was a jolly man.”

Rachael went with Vivian to the dinner and to the play; she insisted on it; and Vivian had the unsettling experience of sitting with a ghost, of walking with a ghost, of watching a ghost eat, of

hearing a ghost laugh its poor ghostly laughter. . . .

Later, when they spoke again of Hugh, Rachael asked if he had received a letter from her.

"I found this in his pocket. He was observing for his battery from our trench," said Vivian, showing a crumpled, unopened envelope.

Rachael stared at the letter which she had written but two days previously, now futile, now nothing meaning. "It is curiously stained," she said at length.

It was.

In her bitterness Rachael derived great comfort from that unopened letter; for her outpouring done in so much duress of spirit, her sudden revelation of self, though wasted, was still private . . . she was still Rachael the Unpossessed, the Unconfessed.

But it was a comfort which served only partially to hide the harm which her spirit had sustained.

For that such a convulsion in a spirit so placid, that such an outstretching of a soul commonly so reserved, should go quite, quite unanswered, be all one-sided, was indeed grievous hurt.

It was a revelation of intimacy which required all the five tendernesses of love to receive, to un-

## THE CHAMELEON'S DISH

derstand, to harbour, to respect, and to answer it. And drawing out her naked soul that it might creep fugitive-wise into the warm and comprehensive soul of another, she was met only by the chill blast of death. Rachael the Proud had knelt at the feet of her conqueror, and, lo, her conqueror did not so much as exist.

And Rachael, stealing very stealthily through the household of her heart, shut slowly all the doors that so suddenly she had flung open, closed slowly all those casements through which so expectantly had she gazed. "O heart," she said, "we have been saved from a great folly or cut off from a splendid fineness, I know not which; but I think that the peril of those lovely waters is too much for Rachael; Rachael must be anchored in the safe seas of selfishness."

And if to those dear eyes now looking down the highway of that journey splendid, so bravely assayed, so brutally denied, came a dimness that served only to make them the more beautiful, be not surprised.

Nor misled; as were many grosser men, noting the triumph of her dress and the tiredness of her face. Have we not said that appearances are deceptive? . . .

And if deceptive in regard to a pretty woman how much more so in regard to that strange being

## MOCKBEGGAR

opposite her, who being shoe-horned out of the train at Piccadilly Circus stood in seeming cheerful bewilderment rather like a large lump of inefficient amiability that had lost its mother; and who was very much nothing of the sort.

His was one of the acutest, the most original, and therefore least effective, brains in London.

Though he looked somewhat of an old fossil he was really much more of a young apostle. He was not by any means a fool. He was a frenzy.

Following that vast back in the mystic darkness of Highgate (whither you have followed him) gave one queer fancies; it looked like some shadowy mountain in retreat before one, like some monstrous, eyeless animal shuffling rapidly backward.

By a little house in Alma Avenue with a lamp-post by it and palings outside it that fantastic back stopped, and with it your even more fantastic theories; it became simply any old gentleman bending over a young figure, his son.

A picture which is at once the most pitiful, the most cheering, the most ludicrous, and the most human thing in the world—a man come home.

A man finding in No. 15 Alma Avenue, Highgate, what nowhere else in the world could he find and what sixty-three other men were nightly finding in that same avenue.

## THE CHAMELEON'S DISH

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Mr. Joseph Wild had little time for his son then, because he had an important engagement on hand, and the other party to it was already there and waiting.

A young man, well built, of rather darkened complexion, of somewhat scowling appearance. Altogether a rather formidable-looking young man.

An old young man.

A young man complete in dark lounge-suit, with the exception only of his left arm, which, somewhat thoughtlessly, he had left behind him in France.

Mr. Joseph Wild became seated, which indeed seemed his natural posture and the one best suited to his build, but our dark and untractable young man, with the heavy brows contracted across the not unhandsome face, elected to remain standing. Mr. Wild had not a crease in his trousers, but the young man had (Mr. Wild had once remarked on this, only to add, perhaps a little inconsequentially, that so often a crease in the trousers denoted one in the soul; but, of course, souls were out of fashion just after the War, so that nobody minded that).

From certain conversation which passed between them it became evident that Mr. Joseph Wild as proprietor employed the services of our young

man as editor of a paper—a paper which at once was Mr. Wild's fineness and his folly, his passion and his piety, his sword and his soul.

A paper which under the somewhat clumsy title of the *Voice in the Wilderness* had achieved little success, but which under the guidance of our dark and capable young man and his freshly chosen title the *New Call* gave promise of better things. It belonged to that very small and select band—the free Press in England. It accepted no advertisements, knew no subsidy—except that of its fanatical owner—and told no lies—except when dealing with its deadliest enemy, the organized Press, and then it lied only in self-defence.

It was not in the slightest anti-Semitic, but whenever it was published (which was twice a week) there just happened to be some fresh Jewish iniquity to be reported, and the *New Call* reported it in full; nor in any sense was it anti-capitalist (“as such,” to quote its own pregnant words), but it was well enough informed to be able to see the dastardly capitalist conspiracy behind the shifting of the hawkers’ pitches from the north to the south side of the Strand and the positively enslaving motive that inspired the “Healthier Houses for All” movement.

But it was a Force; undeniably a Force and a growing one. History has a knack of happening

under our eyes without our being aware of it; people are apt to forget that things happen long before they are set down, for the most part in malice, in some dull history book. The *New Call* had the trick of showing you the thing in progress; people got as interested in it almost as in the only serial ever worth notice—the weekly adventures of Felix; only if you happened to be of the old school harbouring still some suspicion of sentiment for deer-parks and the British Empire and so forth it made rather tragic reading.

There are a few men in every state to-day whose whole prosperity and interests are bound up in the observance of the motto "Lie and let sleeping dogs believe," and the *New Call* with its clamorous disinclination to let anybody believe anything such people did not like one whit. Mr. Joseph Wild had visions, and our dark young man was possessed of convictions—and visions and convictions in conjunction make a very formidable combination indeed, the sort of combination that built the earth, and can just as easily destroy it.

Of course, it was fashionable just then not to have convictions about anything; they were regarded as illegitimate mental children and as such righteously shunned. A decided indecision, a fixed and unfailing flippancy, was the fashion then, but fashions after all change much as do the colours

on our walls; the bricks themselves remain unaltered, and our dark young man was more brick than brilliance. His was the sort of talent which is more likely to be hidden under a serviette than a napkin. His were the sort of eyes, large and untarnished, which make women first of all curious, then somewhat cynically amused, and lastly just a shade ashamed of themselves.

Not that our young man's face was boyish altogether in its inexperience—lying for eight hours inches deep in ice-cold water with a shattered arm is an ill recipe for keeping the first bloom of youth on one's cheeks—but it was a face which first denied deliberate contact with the grosser things of life, a fact to be accounted to its owner for much righteousness, and then refused, as it were, to admit the possibility of such contact in others, which was an idiocy and to lead to greater idiocies. Every man can write one good book, commit one good murder, damn one good soul; and most of us do these things either mentally or physically sooner or later; only women are inclined to work on a more wholesale scale in the matter than the more conservative male.

Our young man was the sort whom men smile at but salute; and, indeed, in his twenties to have achieved the editorship of the *New Call* was an achievement worth salutation. Mr. Joseph Wild

was about as pacific to work with as an earthquake; he spent so much time jumping to conclusions that he was, as it were, a mental monkey swinging from one tree-top of thought to another, while our dark young man with incredible swiftness and solidity supplied the prosaic groundwork of the thing that made the tree-tops possible. Hitching one's wagon to a star is a wonderful action if somebody has built you a sensible, substantial sort of wagon to hitch.

Each day as the young editor of the *New Call* went into his inner office he passed, though he was hardly aware of it, two human beings, Miss Cissie White and Miss Cissie Legge. Vivian had once looked at them, smiled, set them both giggling, and classed them as the quite bearable vicissitudes of office life. These two young women in the intervals between typing (much better than did ever poor Rachael), powdering their noses (much more blatantly than ever she would have thought possible), and going to the pictures (more frequently than anyone unacquainted with the ways of junior typists would believe) had a competition as to which of them would first see their attractively youthful editor smile. After five weeks' close observation Miss Cissie White claimed to have won—it was in her nature to win—but Miss Cissie Legge stoutly maintained that it was no

smile, but merely that settled look of beatific idiocy which momentarily descends upon one's face after successfully suppressing a sneeze. But it were unkind and silly to laugh at seriousness; serious, sober, trouble-taking people are the salt of the earth; only, as Vivian said when expounding that doctrine, after all the salt wouldn't be much good without the earth, would it?

Vivian had a good story to tell of our dark young man. At Oxford there are perhaps more useless bills, tracts, and pamphlets delivered per head of the population than is the case anywhere else in the kingdom; and an undergraduate was seized with the really brilliant idea of sending all such uninteresting things unopened and read-dressed to the proprietor of the Station Hotel at York. It is one of those ideas which denotes sheer genius, and one can only hug it to one's heart and croon quietly over it; but our young editor, being told the tale, was silent for a moment. "But why York?" he said in a puzzled way. . . .

When you absorbed incidents like that you realized, of course, how fittingly our dark and serious young man with but one arm was concerned with the *New Call*.

Business ensued between these two blinded visionaries. The young editor in short, concise sentences, punctuated by queer little nervous move-

## THE CHAMELEON'S DISH

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ments of his lonely right arm and disturbed by sudden stridings of his long legs, gave his views as to the make-up of the next issue. Mr. Joseph Wild like an affable deity gave what was of much more value to the success of his child—his monthly subsidy of £1200. Only he didn't use the word subsidy—he preferred to call it support.

With this "support" in his pocket (which curiously enough he called a "sacrifice") the young man left No. 15 Alma Avenue and hurried by devious and complicated routes towards Knightsbridge, because there he lived and there he was soon to be desperately engaged in that fine fight which nightly enables a man to hold his soul, the encounter of evening dress.

For this clever and nervous young editor, whose darkened eyes bore tragic eloquence to the persistency of his idiocy, was not quite entirely serious, not utterly unsociable; being, as we shall see, bound that very evening to a ball, a very great and noble diversion, the Tallboys' ball, holden by Stephané, Lady Tallboy, at her house in Cadogan Gardens, where, it will be remembered, was always at that time to be seen the very greenest parrot in the whole of London.

## CHAPTER V

SUPPER *is* SERVED *by* MITHRIDATES

TO which ball Rachael came late of right, Vivian of habit, and our dark young man of necessity; and seeing him hover in the doorway Lady Tallboy ran to him in greeting. "Why, Chickie," she cried, "I thought you were never coming," and Chickie blushed a little and smiled a little and looked nervously about, but Vivian following hard on his heels smiled continuously, blushed never a whit (why, indeed, should he?), and looked about anything but nervously; and both their eyes were searching for something that wasn't there.

What did give quite unmistakable evidence of its presence was Mr. Peter Blackman's celebrated orchestra of "Georgian Joes" ("real live negroes, all the way from Georgia"), who with a persistency of perversion which did them infinite credit most barbarously butchered any stray piece of music that happened to be about. In return for this display of energy Mr. Peter Blackman's requirements were simple; he wanted one hundred

guineas per night and enough champagne to make his *troupe* reasonably drunk, "because," as he so explicitly explained, "a drunk nigger plays much better than a sober nigger; it adds vim and zest to the thing"—so quite a lot of bottled vim and zest was placed at his disposal, and connoisseurs noted how much more musically the large and ear-splitting motor-horn was sounded after supper than before.

Vivian, having been observed by Mr. Peter Blackman and by him very respectfully invited to join in the dancing, proceeded to acquire a partner and to do so.

And Vivian was a very good dancer; he had height and grace and a wonderful sense of rhythm; he would indeed in all probability have been considered the most graceful dancer in London rather than Lord Tallboy had he not at that time been a rigid devotee and leader of the Concave Back School. Such conservatism—for conservatism it was—was rare in Vivian. He defended himself on the grounds that women should be given a choice of looking longingly up towards him and that anyway hair was distasteful.

There were but six girls with whom Vivian now danced, and all but one were there that night.

And even as he swept round the room the sixth one arrived, radiant, breathless, queenly—and, lo,

Vivian was not aware of her until, the dance flagging, as he was standing with his partner talking first of this and then of that in the manner Vivianesque he heard a voice say greedily behind him, "Gad, doesn't Rachael look topping!"

"That voice," Vivian thought, his eyes scanning the room quickly, and his lips performing nobly to Miss Nobody his partner, "must belong to some one who has no right whatever to call her Rachael," and he was quite right, because it was the voice of a man even more brutish than Vivian himself; and if ever Vivian were brutal (but it is a harsh term to apply to him) he was at least beautifully so. Vivian's eyes rested at last, and his lips, even his well-trained lips, ceased momentarily their performance to Miss Nobody, for where Rachael danced with Chickie there seemed to be a flowing brilliancy of blackness. And yet, when you looked more carefully, it was not blackness, it was very dark, but it was not blackness. There was the faintest suggestion of a crinoline effect just over the eloquent hips of Rachael, and the small, tightly fitting bodice was nothing but a subdued riot of colours; "a painter's palette *pianissimo*," thought Vivian. The line of the dress was firm, as firm as Rachael's determined little chin, as firm as her provocative little breasts.

There were the daintiest shoulder-straps, and—

loose and free—the sinuous, white, wonderful arms that never touched a man without most strangely moving him. Oh, Captain Molyneux, you must have delighted in that dress; on Vivian's "painter's palette" you had most gloriously gathered the dark and flowing blueness of delphiniums, and that was for desire; the extravagant, rich redness of spilt wine, and that was for "the heart poured out."

And in that dress which almost struck its harmonic chords of colour to your ear danced Rachael with the favoured Chickie.

"Damn it," thought Vivian as he watched their progress round the room, "Chickie's one up on me; I wonder how he spotted her."

It had been a "spotting" entirely Rachaelesque, for to Chickie, standing in somewhat disconsolate aloofness on the fringe of things, had come suddenly from behind the excited little laugh, the slightly mocking voice, "Who is Rachael that she should not dance?"

And he, wheeling round and being confronted with his own imagination materialized, could only make answer (but that gallantly enough) :

"Rather; who is she not?" and then at her invitation Chickie, hideously conscious of his deficiency in the matter, danced.

Now where Chickie's left arm might have been

flapped a pathetic limpness, so that Rachael's right hand lay quite naturally on his shoulder, which, of course (as Vivian thought), was very nice for Chickie.

To Chickie's mind there kept foolishly returning a solitary stanza gathered he knew not where, stored he knew not why:

*I never see her come into the room*

*But what I think, "Ah, now the fiddling's done,  
Now Life's brave footlights leap to stab the gloom,  
The Curtain's up, and see, the Play's begun."*

"The only case," thought Chickie to himself, "where 'but what' is justified." But that was like Chickie; and it was even more like him to suppress such thoughts behind the usual inanities of a dance. For considered basicly it is rather an extraordinary position that with a woman for whom you have ordinarily the profoundest respect, or whom even you may never have seen before, you should be so curiously entangled, your body close to hers, your arm round her, your hands entwined, and that thus intermingled you should strut up and down a hard floor among dozens of other couples as seriously engaged.

So Chickie, flying for safety to the shallowness of small talk, said, being sandwiched suddenly between two most threatening towers of humanity,

"I suppose this is all part of what Lawrence would call the poetry of motion."

"It feels more like the prose of position at present," Rachael laughed; "but you mustn't credit me with that," she added; "I've stolen it from somewhere, I forgot where now."

"You have a habit of stealing things, Rachael," said Chickie after a minute or two.

"But have I?" Rachael smiled up into two eyes that were so hard and so quietly serious. "O-o-oh—surely not. Isn't the band divine?"

Chickie glanced at Mr. Blackman, just then engaged in beating out the time on the unprotesting skull of a negro, but if he were making comparisons with divinity they were not in that direction.

Presently they were stationary near Vivian (now solitary), and Rachael became conscious of him.

"Why, Vivian, why are you not dancing?"

"Nobody found me sufficiently attractive," said Vivian. "Besides," he added, "I am never content with second-bests."

Rachael curtsied. "Thank you, sir," she said.

"But perhaps now," he continued, "you will have mercy on me, Rachael." And so presently again Rachael was dancing.

With Vivian was none of that restraint and awkwardness that her limbs had felt with Chickie.

Vivian was more of her height, his movements were much better synchronized with hers, his body was altogether more sympathetic. And suddenly Rachael was plunged into a wondering and a doubt as to whether his mind were not so too. Chickie, she thought, appeals more to Rachael sober, quite painfully sober; but to Rachael drunk, even but tentatively so, oh, how desperately does Vivian appeal! Whereas one might——

"Would it be unwise," said Vivian softly, "to say that you are the most alluringly dressed person in the room?"

Rachael's thoughts were caught up in that "alluringly."

"Oh, Vivian," she answered his inviting eyes, "what a delightful conspirator you do make!"

And which, her meditation went on, is saner—Rachael sober or Rachael drunk? God alone—Who made Rachael—knows.

"Because you are, you know," he added.

Rachael nodded. "I know," she said. "I *feel* it. My clothes are just like frames of mind, Vivian, mental habits if you will. Do you know I actually feel different in each one I wear, and this has a most wonderful effect—it's like an external application of champagne. This dress makes me feel positively immoral."

"It makes you *look* positively immortal."

And thereafter for a while they danced in silence, each taking delight in the rhythm of the other.

In silence—silence, that is, of the lips; the air was loud with eye intimacy, and uppermost in Rachael's mind was the recurring thought, "Vivian is dear—but dangerous; oh, very dear, but very, very dangerous"; so said her mind, but what her eyes said, those liquid luminosities, only Vivian knows who from so short a distance gazed so fixedly into them. Her heart was silent.

Said Vivian, finally steering towards the less perturbed edge of things, where it is the sad business of every one to pretend that they enjoy looking on—in fact, that they came for no other purpose—"Shall we take a breather? This business of maintaining the Peace is much too strenuous for me. Give me a nice, comfortable war again any day."

"Comfortable—oh, Vivian, how could you?"

"Much less energetic than this, I do assure you, my dear, and anyway the impression that the majority of people were heroic in the War is a ludicrous fraud. We never knew there were so many heroes until we read *John Bull* and saw the Honours List—"

"However," said Vivian, stopping by a secluded seat, "all that there is the War, and now that

this disastrous Peace has broken out that's all finished. I am going to enjoy this Peace," he said darkly.

Lady Tallboy was good at secluded seats (remember, she had been Stephané Dalmeny once and in all probability she would still have been Stephané Dalmeny had it not been for just such a seat, just so sufficiently secluded).

Lady Tallboy was full of that wonderful modern tact which consists in using the utmost speed to put any two of your guests into a position of the greatest embarrassment. But, of course, Vivian thrived on that, he being embarrassed only when confronted by other people's bad manners, and not always then.

Lady Tallboy—or rather Stephané—had a malicious joy in making a tour of all her secluded spots at an early hour next day, and from a Holmesian inspection of each and its surrounding terrain deducing conclusions as to the success of her pairing. Her museum of trifles thus collected was intensely amusing—and even instructive; it shows one desperately how a little clothing is a dangerous thing.

While Vivian and Rachael were thus closeted in seclusion Mr. Frank Martindale was being delivered of several sayings to a very wise and critical audience.

Mr. Frank Martindale is a young man very well worth your attention, please.

The best description of him is that constantly you went into a place looking for Vivian and you saw Frank Martindale. Not that they were externally similar at all; both had good height, but Frank's was carried more stiffly, just a shade less uncorrectly. Frank was dark, not unlike Hugh in the general sombre look of him, but his darkness was rather more wickedly attractive than had been Hugh's. Frank's eyes were very merry, and his lips were very cruel.

Frank had read enough to have a theory of life; Chickie had read so much that he had a life of theory; Vivian—the healthy barbarian—made a practice of Life. Martindale enjoyed his own romantic misadventures and affairs because he could recognize the fundamental idiocies from which they sprang, nor did this in any way affect his genuine amusement at them. He was one of those few people who can look behind the scenes and retain some respect for the play. Hence, of course, he was destined to be an Author. And a very nice prospective author he made, too, with his darkness and his somewhat dissipated air, and his general impression somehow of being just round the corner of things.

Frank, who had never kissed a girl reverently

or because he loved her in his life, had in his heart a sanctuary of most brave ideals; and you would venture a long way with him before you even guessed at its existence. This was an idolatry whence, all else thrown aside, sometimes in the privacy of his heart he took courage and was reassured against the day and dalliances commonplace. He was the best of friends and a friend only of the best, being somewhat fastidious in his likes and dislikes, and thinking often on that old Wykehamite saying that "Manners makyth man."

Girls said commonly of Frank Martindale that they did not understand him, which as usual meant, of course, that he did not understand them; he was dangerously in doubt as to how far woman was animal and how far divine. The truth of the two extremes was constantly being urged upon him both in word and deed on the one hand by Vivian and by Chickie on the other; but in his unconvinced, amused way Frank stood for the most part in tentative tolerance bewteen them; for the most part—for Frank was abstemious, but sometimes, of course, he experimented, and that left him much more undecided than ever, and when he was thus more than usually in doubt he took counsel often of a woman who assuredly was in a position to know—Mrs. Macready. As now he did; there being something in her readily re-

sponsive to the amused and cynically tolerant outlook on life which was budding in him.

"A serious business this of dancing," he said thoughtfully, lighting a cigarette. "How ludicrous is the human animal when disporting itself."

"Ludicrous at all times," Mrs. Macready said, eyeing him and his cigarette a little impatiently, "but never more so than when discussing itself."

"Ah!" said Frank. The "ah" defensive.

"And why," Mrs. Macready asked, turning suddenly on him, "are you not dancing? Is it a sort of superior effortlessness?" She had a way of turning suddenly on one that often made Vivian inclined to bolt. Frank smiled a little reflectively; he did not consider it worth while to tell her the real reason of his inactivity.

"Being refused by the sun," he bowed gallantly, "how should one be content with lesser lights?"

"Silly boy," cried Mrs. Macready, being nearly sixty but smiling, being a woman; "but didn't I hear something about your heart?"

Mrs. Macready heard everything, of course.

"Who should rather than you?" Frank asked, rather pleased with his first gallantry. Mrs. Macready would have rebuked him had she not, in her wisdom, known that to be divertingly foolish is much more pleasant than to be boringly wise.

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"But your heart," she insisted; "didn't Dorothy Westlake tell me something?"

"Is this the heart amatory or the heart purely anatomical?"

"Oh, stick to anatomy for the present; it's far less involved."

"Just a trifle unwilling, you know—a surfeit of gas"—which was rather a colourless rendering of his doctor's digression on the subject, but it sufficed.

"Ah, there is Dorothy," Mrs. Macready said; she never wasted time in sympathy.

And there was Dorothy; completely clad in yellow, grown somewhat taller, somewhat firmer; she danced with Chickie.

Mrs. Macready and Frank watched them in silence round the room. Thought Frank, "How like a sudden splash of daffodils, if daffodils grow in splashes, but anyway how refreshing!"

"I thought she was a girl," Mrs. Macready said, "but I am mistaken. I see she is a woman."

Frank was amazed at the interpretation of his own thoughts, but he said airily enough, "And where precisely is the dividing line, added charm or merely loss of honesty?"

"The difference," said she, "is that girls, unlike young men, have more sense than sex——"

Frank laughed. "Ah, well," he said, filling up

her silence, "marriage levels matters up." They were inclined to be Elizabethan, these two.

"Do you approve of fyer-Wilson's dancing?" Mrs. Macready asked suddenly after a silence.

"I?" cried Frank. "But I don't mind whom he dances with."

"I said nothing about his pãrtner; I was referring only to his dancing."

"Oh, I see; why, he's moderately good, but Chickie's too busy to be a good dancer."

"He overworks, I think," said Mrs. Macready. "His eyes look very tired. And full," she added.

"Full?"

"Of visions," she explained. "That young man is too much of a visionary to be successful; he puts people on pedestals."

"A thankless proceeding," Frank laughed; "they don't stay there; I gave it up years ago."

"Yes," said Mrs. Macready, "and have regretted it ever since; you may be modern enough to have ideas, Frank, but Chickie is old-fashioned enough to have ideals; and I know which I prefer."

"But Chickie's ideals are so often only idols," Frank objected.

"Well," she said, "idolatry is much more sensible and constructive than iconoclasm."

"It's a fool's paradise; people aren't perfect."

“There was only one paradise,” Mrs. Macready said, “and that wasn’t made by a fool.”

“But Chickie can’t keep his idols for ever,” said Frank. “Sooner or later,” he added, feeling rather like the subtitle to a second-rate film, “he will see the feet of clay.”

“The only feet he’ll ever see beneath his idol,” said Mrs. Macready, “are the feet of Ray.”

Frank suddenly ceased feeling like a second-class film. “Oh——” he said.

“And where is Dalmeny?” Mrs. Macready said abruptly.

Frank laughed a little deprecatingly. “*Cherchez la femme.*”

“Trite.”

“But true,” he defended himself, “for where is Rachael?” Mrs. Macready sniffed.

“I do believe,” Frank added a moment later, “that Dorothy’s is the only yellow dress in the room; how well it seems to suit her, doesn’t it?”

“Lord sakes,” cried Mrs. Macready, “a man on dress; that was never a sign of the heart anatomical that I knew of yet.”

Frank knew the privileges of age; he merely laughed with quite natural ease, and said “Ah!” reflectively. . . . The “ah” quite entirely uncommunicative.

Rachael was, as we have seen, all this time holding session in a secluded spot.

"Why," she asked, "do you say so threateningly, Vivian Dalmeny, that you are going to enjoy this Peace? For who is not?"

Vivian laughed even more darkly and said, "This is the Peace to end all Peace, and it will be best to enjoy it while we can."

"While we can?"

"We are born at a very interesting period," said Vivian quickly, "and Providence with unusual foresight has destined remarkable happenings for remarkable people, such as us. We are, I do feel quite sure, to see the collapse of that settled order of things which we call Society and which hitherto has seemed to us so unassailable."

"But do you really think so?" Rachael cried, eyeing this sudden flow of eloquence with some mistrust. "Do you mean Bolsheviks and things?"

Vivian nodded sombrely. "Democracy," he saged, "is upon us, and that means quite a dead level of effortless inferiority."

"But how exciting to be in at the death! And can you really imagine these horrors," she went on, "when you look at Piccadilly full of taxis and buses and things?"

"It is hard," Vivian admitted, "but buses

would make splendid tumbrils, I have often thought."

"How very bloodthirsty," Rachael cried, now becoming interested in spite of herself by reason of that primitive social instinct which underlies all men's minds, the cave-and-cudgel instinct. "Do you honestly think that it's possible in England—I mean, with all our police and troops and so on? I mean, look at the London police——"

"I should look rather well at my execution," Vivian mused, far away in the Imaginative Chronicles of Dalmeny. "The tall young aristocrat going to his death. I should wear a dinner-jacket, I think. What does one wear at one's execution? Perhaps tails would be more polite to Providence. It would make a ghastly mess of a stiff shirt anyway. . . ."

"The War has made you beastly, Vivian," Rachael protested, "and you're conceited and morbid; besides, you're not an aristocrat, and all these horrid things won't happen."

"I am related to Tallboy."

"Well, that's not your fault."

"No, true enough, it's Stephané's; she always was rather careless of whom she mixed with."

"But won't it be strange, Rachael," he said, "when all the present things are changed, broken down, to meet in some reasonable place—Bond

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Street, say—all deserted and empty, and grass-grown, and to stare at one another like ghosts from a former world? Dishevelled, unkempt, unshaved.” (“I don’t shave” rose to Rachael’s lips, but she was interested enough to suppress it.) “Won’t it seem different from all this? “Won’t all this seem—seem *incredible*? Do you think I shall have sufficient left to sweep off my battered hat?

“Oh, I do think,” he went on, “that we must, some of us must, try desperately hard to preserve a few illusions. To be an outpost of civilization, to hang on to a few of the more reasonable things, you know. And fancy meeting like that and talking in queer whispers of Josef and La Fantastique, of Ascot and the Ritz, of Half Moon Street and of scent and flowers and furs  
\_\_\_\_\_”

There was silence for a minute.

“Good gracious me,” Rachael cried with unnecessary gaiety, “I never suspected that you harboured such thoughts, Vivian.”

“I don’t—really,” he laughed; “they are Chickie’s, I suppose; at any rate he was expounding them the other night, and he did it damned well, too; it quite made me think.”

“I knew something unusual had occurred,” said Rachael, “and you really have quite fright-

ened me. Because always," she said, rising, "am I Rachael the Comfortable, and if any revolution ever threatens my hot-water bottle I do hope that it will be quite ruthlessly suppressed. And if all those horrid things are going to take place," she said, "let us go and dance quickly."

Vivian rose. "Admirable sentiment," he said. "If I could remember a verse from the *Rubáiyát* I would quote it now. Chickie, I think, must have bewitched me; I am so relieved that you haven't fallen under his spell."

And together they lightheartedly gave up the contemplation of destiny for the immediate one of "Destiny."

A very pathetic, noble, and ridiculously courageous spectacle this, of these two insignificant atoms, splendid in their evanescent finery, quite deliberately contemptuous of all their unavoidable Fate.

Providence must feel exceedingly piqued at times.

In due course there was supper, and a very good supper, too, at which was much hilarity and diversion of spirit, particularly at the table where sat Stephané, Lady Tallboy, with her most intensely green parrot perched on her

chair. The name of this parrot was Alphonso, and it was always referred to as Jenny.

At the same table—and it was a tribute to Lady Tallboy's skilful shepherding—sat Rachael and her partner, Dorothy and her partner, Mrs. Macready and her partner. Eustace, Lord Tallboy partnered Mrs. Macready, and Stephané had honoured Chickie. The other four were so hilariously intermingled that it was become difficult to know exactly to whom Vivian or Frank was attached.

The Tallboys had a butler called, quite incredibly, Mithridates, and he was very much attached to Stephané and very attentive to her wants. Vivian always maintained that Mithridates and the parrot had somehow got mixed up and exchanged their names, and never could he be prevailed upon to call either correctly, saying when Stephané expostulated that "Mithridates was no more than a myth."

And so what with one thing and another uprightness broadened into uproariousness.

"Are you still one of the world's workers, Rachael?" asked Mrs. Macready, who stately in her years and steady in her youth sat there looking for all the world—as Vivian afterwards remarked—exactly like what Mr. Lytton Strachey

did not expect Queen Victoria to look like, "a Roman matron in a *char-à-banc*."

"The nation being organized I am dismissed," Rachael said, "or, rather, my chief being married I am superfluous."

"Your chief," groaned Vivian. "My dear Ray, you're becoming Americanized; does Alphonsus go round the house collecting chewing-gum every morning?"

"I knew some very nice American officers," Rachael said provokingly.

Vivian laid down his fork. "This," he said, "is serious; a nation that will wear a straw hat with even——"

"Vivian," cried Stephané, "for Gawd's sake, stop. Everything you are going to say is right; moreover, it is lamentably obvious; so please spare us; and I am dying to know whom that frightful Philips person married?"

"Philips? Who is Philips?" Frank asked.

"Mr. Philips," Rachael said, "was my chief, and he was not such a frightful person really. I had him to tea once. He really has quite a surprising amount of sense for a man—common sense, of course."

"Yes, of course," said Stephané.

"Philips," Chickie said with surprising bitterness, "is one of the most dangerous and unscrupu-

lous men alive. He and Stetson are the most powerful force for evil in England to-day."

Vivian summoned Mithridates. "Just ring up Mr. Oppenheim," he said, "and tell him he's missing something."

"And whom, after all this, did this dangerous person marry?" asked Mrs. Macready, who had a way of sticking to the point.

"Ah, whom?" asked everybody.

"A Miss Hetty Prince," said Rachael, smiling intimately at a *pêche Melba*.

There was stupefaction.

"Not *the* Hetty?" Frank asked.

"*Our* Hetty?" cried Vivian.

"I am not aware of the extent to which you possessed her," Rachael answered, quite calmly oblivious of the commotion she had created, "but she is, I think, the only Hetty Prince."

"That rather pretty girl we saw at La Comique?" asked Chickie.

Rachael nodded.

There was silence.

"But Hetty," Vivian cried exasperatedly, "was divine."

"No doubt, then," Rachael said, "Mr. Philips is enjoying the bliss of Paradise; but that, I can't help thinking," she added, "he will find rather boring."

Vivian glared, just like the boy he was, quite angrily at everybody. He hated the pleasant things in his life being changed; and changed, moreover, without his knowledge or consent.

There sat at the next table behind them a rather foxy, ferrety-looking individual, who was quite obviously interested in the name of Miss Hetty Prince.

"Who is that extraordinary person?" asked Stephané. "Is he a friend of yours, Tallboy?"

"No," said Tallboy, "an enemy. This is a supper to Cerberus."

"Well, please," said Stephané, "don't have people with those weird names at my dances any more."

"His name," Tallboy laughed, "is Haughton, and he is an American; but don't let that deter you," he added with some subtlety.

"Well, that's worse," said his wife. "Why, my dear man, there *are* no Haughtons."

It struck Vivian as a mildly confirmative thing that this Haughton being was the author of that appreciative comment on Rachael which he had overheard and which had so annoyed him in the earlier part of the evening.

There came a moment when Rachael was alone with Mrs. Macready.

This happened to everybody at times; it was inevitable, "like meeting your conscience," as Vivian had said, and Rachael didn't mind meeting her conscience in the least; in fact, she rather liked it and treated it very well, being always very polite and considerate towards strangers.

"And what do you think of them?" asked Mrs. Macready, nodding towards the company, where Vivian danced with Stephané, Chickie with some divinity not closely germane to this narrative, and Frank with Dorothy.

"I think Frank dances very nicely," said Rachael; "much better than he used to."

"Well, that's something for the War to have achieved. And do you think the others have gained anything?"

"Gained? But how should they? A certain rather pleasant cynicism perhaps."

"And lost?"

This, thought Rachael, is not a conversation at all; it's a profit and loss account. "Oh, a little youthful callowness."

"Vivian, callow?"

"All men are callow," said Rachael, which annoyed Mrs. Macready, because it was the sort of remark that she had hoped Rachael had outgrown.

"And some women are very unobservant," she

said. "fyer-Wilson, has lost an arm, but the Martindale boy has lost his smile, and that, I think, is the more disastrous of the two."

"I think he has only mislaid it," said Rachael thoughtfully. "And Vivian?"

"Dalmeny has gained considerably in charm, but he has quite utterly lost his soul."

That, of course, thought Rachael, is nonsense, and it shows what nasty things an old woman will say; *I* think—and who should know but I?—that Vivian has discovered his soul and found it rather amusing on the whole; aloud she merely said, "You have so much more experience in these things, Mrs. Macready, than I; I am afraid it had quite escaped my observation."

"It would," said Mrs. Macready grimly.

And as both of them were wrong neither this conversation nor the enmity that grew out of it is of much consequence to the story.

There came a time for departing; not that there was any set time for such a thing at 3A Cadogan Gardens—people just faded away when they felt bored; and as Vivian never felt bored at a dance he never faded away and had to be forcibly ejected by Tallboy, Mithridates respectfully assisting. With Vivian went the pro-Rachaelites—as somebody called them—and much of the hilarity of the proceedings.

Dorothy Westlake was staying with Rachael at Half Moon Street, and together they drove there, disdaining all other company, stoutly maintaining their ability to look after themselves. Which, of course, nobody ever doubted for an instant: Rachael being capable, as everybody admitted, of looking after an earthquake.

And while Rachael sat before her Dutch dressing-table smoothing that wild cascade of blackness that was her hair Dorothy, her friend, was delivered of certain opinions concerning the late lamented ball.

Said she, "What were you talking to the Duchess about, Ray?"

"The spiritual state of the trinity, my dear."

"Their *spiritual* state?"

"Surely; one must allow the Duchess that she probably knows nothing of their physical condition."

"Ray, you are awful; and what did you say about them?"

"I? My dear, I was busy rejecting heresy. It was the Duch who *said*."

"She said, for instance," Rachael went on, "that Frank had lost his smile. Now you ought to know something about that."

"But how silly," said Dorothy; "why, he smiles divinely; what else did she say about him?"

## MOCKBEGGAR

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"Nothing, I think; I defended his dancing."

"Yes, hasn't he improved? He's miles better than Chickie, I think."

"Ah," said Rachael vaguely, "everybody is better than Chickie. That's what comes of losing one's arm—and heart."

Rachael fell asleep with a confused mingling of Vivian in a battered hat, of Mrs. Macready behind the Recording Angel's Book, of the ugly look of hunger with which the being Haughton had watched their departure, and of Chickie's sweet and simple seriousness.

All of which grew into a first-class nightmare of shapes that sped with incredible speed and yet stood unmoved, of shadows that were darkest when light was most brilliant, of forms that loomed threateningly like giant thunder-clouds, and of mouths that spoke hideously and were quite inaudible; and all that a sleepily disgruntled Rachael could remember of it in the morning was that "everybody seemed intensely imminent, my dear, and I hate imminent people."

CHAPTER VI

MR. LYONS *provides* BUNS *which are* CURIOUSLY
CONSIDERED

HEREIN you are to be a privileged witness of a meeting that is in itself (revealing as it does a not unsubtle play and interplay of but half-comprehended emotions, half-caught promptings of the heart) of some considerable interest, and one which in its bearing on this awkwardly unfolding story is of most vital import.

For the amazing and annoying thing about life is that, unlike all the books ever written about it, it *does* unfold awkwardly. People are animated not by logic, but by love. There are no tables for the tides of the heart. People (in spite of Miss Rose Macaulay) do not speak clearly, or act clearly, or think clearly—and a good job, too; there are quite enough suicides as it is. Life is much more like Babel than a book; and if ever you meet anyone who professes to be clear-headed and glories therein mistrust him thoroughly—it is so likely to be the clarity of vacuity. People do not only talk about one thing and do another, but

they talk about one thing and go away and do ten thousand others; and the system underlying their actions is as nearly related to alchemy as to algebra.

Why, for instance, should you on this particular morning be walking in Regent Street? Goodness only knows, but then why not? Regent Street is a very reasonable place indeed and one which holds sweet ghosts for many men.

In fact, the case for not being elsewhere can be put in a nutshell: everybody knows that the drains on the estate are bad, but why go and smell them?

The slums of a modern city are eloquent testimony to no more than the ignorance, ineptitude, or cowardice of those that dwell therein, and, whether you have money or not, avoid them and walk in the pleasant places.

All of which thoughts should certainly have carried your feet in a direction still more westerly—but no, with the glorious inconsequence of all things you are busily striding into Trafalgar Square, which is a vulgar, jostling place and one not in the slightest degree relieved by that monstrosity of stone whose only commendation can be that it removes one of London's ugliest statues (and that is a terrible indictment) well out of view. There is a sort of feeling current in the Square and along the Strand that if Provi-

MR. LYONS PROVIDES BUNS

dence is any farther off than Nelson it can't see much.

The Strand—that mile of blatancy, whither (God forgive you) you seem to be, nay, actually are, bound. The Strand surely must be the finest example in Europe of the missed opportunity. It might have been a street—indeed, a Street—and it is no more than a stutter; a stammer of incoherent tawdriness.

When one has seen—and assimilated—the Strand and the Albert Memorial one begins to realize how it is that we have accumulated an Empire and why the rest of the world hates us.

Americans, one is credibly informed, love the Strand. One believes it. But why you, who we had hoped were of us, of the small and easy elegance that will be a trifle disappointed to find no Piccadilly in Paradise, why you should be walking here is incomprehensible. One can only suggest, as a means of finding a solution, that Frank's somewhat cynical test be applied. Truth is nearly always cynical, though but a few cynics are truthful; and certainly we grant you that your taste is excellent.

You follow a girl "divine in brown." It is She.

Not many paces along the Strand there is one "splendid in his suit of black." It is He.

Now whether this meeting were of design,

fortuitous, or unfortunate you cannot say; yours only to be invisibly present and all things to note.

There was within the heart of that She a curious turmoil. The heart, it seemed, was moving house, and all the precious furniture lay carelessly about, all the dead and dusty hopes quite ruthlessly exposed. Human house-movers, that tribe of ruddy and wrinkled men, incline one to desperation, but spiritual ones that invisibly remove the trappings of your heart, leaving it coldly empty, are positively ghastly.

And if, to one in that plight, should come a refuge of sorts only, a safety of any description . . .

So she cried, "But what on earth brings you here? I thought you were most grimly busy."

And he, laughing a little, "I am, quite horribly so; and you? I thought you never stepped without your Monarchy of Mayfair."

"I have subjects in all parts," she said, "and nothing shall limit me; I am a Woman of Experience."

"But," she added quickly, touching him lightly with her hand, "I am sorry I said that. It was a silly thing, because just now I feel like a woman of no experience whatsoever."

There was something in her voice that brought his eyes down rather suddenly. "Good Lord," he

said, "*you* must not start being depressed. You always have such a zest for life."

"I've a terrific zest for something to eat at present," she said with determined inconsequentiality. "But," she added, "it must be a bun."

"Really? Do you eat buns? I should have thought——"

"No, no, no. It must be a bun. Buns are quite philosophically simple and are absolutely unknown territory to me. It must be awful fun exploring them, they are such vast things; perhaps," she said thoughtfully, "there is a bunny literature, bunthologies, and things. . . ."

Such brave futilities does the heart employ to keep its colours flying. . . .

After that, of course, there could be no more argument, and as she was possessed of a conviction that Mr. Lyons always kept large quantities of buns on hand together they sought his hospitality.

And in a corner, an intimate corner, of what seemed to her to be a peculiar place, seated at a queer little marble-topped table they were presently confronted by two enormous buns.

The place in which they sat was not, of course, really peculiar; it was a large room bounded by three walls of ordinary brick and an ordinary plate-glass window, and containing quite a num-

ber of little marble-topped tables exactly similar to the one at which they sat and exactly one-fourth that number of pretty-aproned and feet-aching young women, who were all continually beset by three harassing doubts as to (a) whether any customer would complain of "a lack of civility," (b) whether they could possibly keep standing to the end of the day, and (c) whether Alf would be too late to take them to the one-and-threepenny seats at the Marble Arch Cinema.

And into this ordinary room, notably at certain hours of the day, rushed a great army of most commonplace human beings (just like you and me, only rather more practical), who were all very hungry and very anxious to be served, and who all cried a sort of battle-cry, a *potpourri* of "Sausageandmash," "Twopoachedeggson," and the like. For the great majority of these people this was their dinner, please notice that, and a quite considerable occurrence in their daily life. Thank God, of course, for civilization and the strides of science.

But, considered properly, all things human have about them a glamour of the divine, and if that lady, in her unnecessary dalliance there, threw about the place some mist of fairyland she was not perhaps in so much error as you might suppose.

Said she, surveying her plate gravely, "This is not a bun; it is a tract of territory."

"Invade it," he suggested; and with two delightful rows of white warriors she did so. In like manner he also essayed his, but with whatever show of readiness their lips accepted food their hearts were hungrier still.

And in that dim region which, loosely, we call the back of the brain, but which is much more like the front of the soul, there was a curious insistence within him—"You cannot very well hold out against this much longer. You cannot live indefinitely in all the noise and racket of that printing-press. Your soul must have sanctuary, and, besides, why hold out at all? It is a thing which obviously was meant to be. . . ."

"I have tried this bun," she said, "and I shall write to Mr. Lyons about it. I said that buns were philosophic, and so they are; this one's just like Life—all the sugar's outside."

"There's a blob of jam in the middle."

"Ah, you've progressed farther than I have; you must be more experienced or more greedy. And what an ugly word 'blob' is."

"Quite; it is, I'm sorry. Oasis; an oasis of jam surrounded by a bunny waste."

"Oh, a bunny waste," she cried delightedly, clapping little hands; "how splendid!"

And they laughed together.

"And do you think," she said, fingering a fork, "that there is a bunny waste round things in general?" She looked up. "I mean, 'a waste round Life?"

He looked into eyes that were very unsettling, and away again.

"But surely there are no such things this season," he said with the greatest jocularly.

She was angry.

"No, no," she cried. "Why will you imitate a style that isn't yours? Why won't you be *real*?"

"Ah," he said slowly and quite simply as though he suddenly understood a lot and were relieved of a great burden, "I think there are deserts which are positively damnable."

It was the bareness of the voice and the unwontedness of that pathetic swear-word in his speech which moved her.

"Ah, don't," he said, bending closely over the table, "don't think I meant that feeble idiocy. You must know that it is the sort of thing I hate really—I only do it in self-defence——"

"But are we all flippant in self-defence?" she cried a little wanly.

"Self-defence," he caught her up slowly and with something of a smile; "it is a curious word to be using to each other, isn't it?"

"But we are using it to our buns," she said, taking up hers again. "It is they who threaten or defy us."

"And what," she said after a long and fruitful silence, "is the name of the desert in your bun?"

"It seems very tautologous," he said, "but its name is 'The Desert Deserted'; and—andyours?"

She peered very carefully into her bun, prodding it with a fork. "Mine," she made answer slowly, "is 'The Desert of Loneliness,' oh, ghastly, ghastly loneliness!"

He smiled ruefully. "I think we must both be in the land where the bridges are broken——"

"The bridges?"

"That is my conceit. It has so often come to me, and lately with such increasing force, that each of us stands so quite alone. If God had put us all in spiritual cages He would have separated us less. It seems sometimes that across the gulf that surrounds us we can't throw a bridge of human words even to another human creature. Sometimes, of course, you *know*; without any words, you just *know* that somebody else is thinking and feeling as you do——"

She nodded. "I've felt that."

"—and yet I think at the same time you are conscious of your inability to express what you both know."

She nodded again.

"But that is very depressing," she said. "I should not enjoy Life a bit by myself; and yet I think it is true."

"I often wonder," he went on slowly and as though it were a continuation of what they had just been saying, "why God is so fond of our being children."

"Children?"

"Childlike."

"But is He? I always imagined God as a very serious old gentleman that one would have to talk politics to; like an old clergyman who used to call on us at Hatton Priors—he always reminded me of God."

"And now God only reminds you of him; how changed an outlook!"

"But everybody's outlook about God changes, surely; the more one learns about Providence the more disappointing It seems."

"Hugh never thought that."

"Hugh? But then—ah, but then Catholics think such strange things." After a silence, "Was it Hugh who made that remark about God's preference for children?"

"Um."

"And do you think it is true?"

"I think God likes us to be a little bit afraid of

Life, as children of the dark, you know; I think He wants us to stretch out for somebody's hand in Life."

"And yet He isolates us?"

"He gives us ways out, I think"—their eyes met across the table—"if—we—dare—to—take—them," he went on slowly, and for quite a very long time, which was much less than a second, they looked steadily at each other.

"Oh, my dear, dear, dear," he cried, catching her hand that had stolen across the table, "oh, my dear, I have dared. I do dare; I have been so cowardly; it did seem so incredible that you could ever need me, that I could possibly keep pace with you through life——"

"Ah, but it's seldom that I hurry," she said, smiling faintly, "and then only down slopes."

"There is a spirituality about this," he cried, "that outweighs everything else; it will be such a commingling of minds; such mental marriage——"

"I think," he went on very gravely—with sweet gravity, she thought—"that every good woman is meant to be an escape for at least one man from an otherwise intolerable condition of things, a sudden light in such darkness; and so much more than that you are to me."

"But," she said, with eyes downcast, for she

had never thought these things of marriage, never guessed her capture would be only a surrender, "you must not put me on a pedestal; I am so poor a thing——"

"Poor," he caught almost angrily at the word; oh, never, never that, dear, with your splendid intensity."

She tried desperately to display her weaknesses, and with a touch of almost forgotten lightness said, "But I'm much more of a butterfly, I'm afraid, than a beacon."

He laughed the happy laugh of uncontrovertible faith. Ah, don't be so humble, dear," he cried. "Pride so well becomes you."

She was a woman, so she asked, "When did you first—first know?"

"Always," he said; "but no, not always. I did not always *know*—I was always puzzled about it, I think, even in the old days before Hu—when Hugh was alive; it was like having all the calculations of a sum before me and being able to make nothing of them—and then suddenly at the Tallboys' ball I saw you across the room and, oh, I saw the answer. And it was astounding, incredible to me that I could have missed seeing it before. I felt then that I should walk a lonely man through all the way of things."

"But you said nothing, dear, and I was a woman to have been won."

"Oh," he cried, "I was a coward outside the castle of you. I said, 'She moves in such quickened ways, her heart goes so splendidly faring I cannot match it, I cannot hope to match it.'"

"Hearts dance for emptiness at times, I think."

"But never now, never, never now; believe that, dear. You know what we were saying all those years ago about God liking us to cling to another in all the darkness of things; remember that."

"Yes," she said, "that was a beautiful thing; and I do think, dear, that you look very beautifully on all the muddled and confused things that do seem so ugly and perplexing; but whether," and this was half to herself, "I shall ever be simple enough, and have common courage enough for all the littlenesses——"

There was a silence in which all the gigantic bustle of the Strand outside was much too insignificant for them to notice. "Yes," he said at last, "I know what you mean. I, too, have felt that—that the meannesses and trivialities will swallow one up, but Hugh broke me of that doubt——"

"Ah, Hugh," she sighed so softly that it was inaudible.

“Hugh used always to pray at night that he might be helped to see the beauty and the dignity of all the common things of life, and I do think that it was a manly prayer.”

“Ah, Hugh——

“And will my spiritual hands fit yours?” she asked with that rare whimsicality that made her suddenly so much more charming than a woman has any right to be.

He glanced down on the table. “It is prefigured,” he said.

She smiled, half for weariness, half for surrender, and wholly for incomprehensibility. “It is, it is,” she said, and then in that strange fairy-land of the commonplace was ratified their pact with a solemn spirituality.

“The buns,” she cried, “we never finished them!”

There sat a woman brushing a great mass of black hair with all the careful idleness of pre-occupation; said she, laying the brush thoughtfully on the dressing table before her, “My dear, I did such extraordinary things to-day.”

“But you always do extraordinary things,” said her companion, with something of drowsy impatience.

“Ah,” she smiled faintly, “but this really *was*

extraordinary. I went into a shop kept by Mr. Lyons."

"Are you doing the puzzles on his *menus*?"

"Puzzles—does he provide any?" She picked up the brush again. "But I had enough without; I ate a bun."

"You must be getting morbid, and I wish you weren't so vain. I'm horribly tired."

"But I must be particularly careful about my appearance now," she said, commencing to brush her hair again with long, curving sweeps; "you see, I also became engaged."

"You *what*?" her companion cried, starting bolt upright in bed like a plump, serious, resurrected ghost. "My dear, who on earth to?"

"He is very serious and very sweet——"

"Ah," said the plump, attentive ghost.

"—and frightfully young and sometimes quite crushingly old."

"Oh," said the ghost.

"—and, oh, my dear, it is all very puzzling and perplexing, and I don't know a bit whether to laugh or to cry. Never, never did I, who have known so many men, imagine that being engaged to one would be a bit like this. . . ."

"You poor darling," cried the ghost, jumping out of bed and throwing her arms round her deity. . . .

So is doubt solaced by devotion.

CHAPTER VII

A TEA-PARTY

Mr. Frank Martindale describes the entertainment

IT is astonishing how the more one tries to withdraw from certain things the more one seems to get involved with them, and how resolutions to avoid people bring inevitably in their train circumstances which make such avoidance impossible—but that, of course, is beginning quite at the wrong end, and, as Mrs. Macready says, there are quite enough muddle-headed people in the world already without deliberately adding to their number. I like that woman—she is so extraordinarily sensible.

Certainly when I came to Bibury I had no thought for quite a long time but to be a Biburian or whatever the natives of this part are called. I came first on foot, because I was, secretly, horribly annoyed those other two should have conceived the idea of a walking-tour originally and not I; it did seem so much more characteristic of me. However, I was the first to go alone, and

A TEA-PARTY

certainly I should never have chosen the conventional Sussex—its obviousness is painful; I suppose that was Chickie.

I came first to Bibury after a hard day on the Cotswolds; a day in which literally I had thought of nothing else whatsoever except that rather fine line from an otherwise almost negligible man,

. . . and see

Unscabbarded against the sky

The bare blue blade of Cotswolds lie,

and when I got to Bibury, coming down to it off the old Fosse Way, though I was too tired to appreciate its beauty then as subsequently I have learned to do, yet even then, at the end of that hard, bare sort of day, it was like coming to outstretched arms. Or perhaps it was more like the quiet arms of a homely woman folded in repose. It was very beautiful and cool, and when I saw Meadow Cottage winking a friendly eye through the dusk I simply slipped off my pack and walked in. Since when, so to speak, I have used no other.

It is symbolical of one's futility, I think, and of the determination of Fate in these matters that I should have chosen this cottage above all others; for Mrs. Leatham, the tenant, had lately lost her husband, who had been one of the gardeners to Big Bibury, a rather low, sullen-looking house

stuck up on the hill; and the second day that I was there the owner of Big Bibury and its cottages came down to see Mrs. Leatham, who had given notice to leave, as she was going to her sister in Gloucester, who has a little milliner's shop. (My God, the garrulity of the countryside is evidently infectious!)

I was amazed to find that it was Garnett-Watkins, one of my father's oldest friends and closest *confrères* at the Bar. He was the sort of local deity and family friend in the comfortable cap-touching days when I was a boy, and he first taught me how to snare a rabbit and the sacredness of good port.

He didn't know me at first, which was rather flattering, but we soon became *au fait* again, and he insisted on dragging me up to dinner (I dined in a smoking-jacket, which he dug up for me, and perfectly good plus-fours).

The old man was horribly garrulous and distressingly anecdotal, but what did emerge of interest from the evening was that the new gardener was a single man and was to live in the bothy, and that Meadow Cottage wanted a tenant.

"Not much difficulty about letting it," the old boy chuckled; "people simply tumbling over themselves for houses to-day. Simpson, where's the port?"

I let him examine the port in silence; no optimist ever approached the gates of Paradise under closer scrutiny than did a bottle of wine Garnett-Watkins; and then I said, "But let it to me—it's just the place I want." The old buffer was quite flatteringly pleased, and it was all fixed up at an absurdly low rent, which made me feel rather mean, as it seemed like taking an unfair advantage of him to conclude the deal over wine. However, he insisted, and my scruples were easily overcome, for I was delighted at the prospect; the only thing I feared was that I should be dragged up to Big Bibury every single night to do the heavily polite by laughing at the less frequent of his stories and losing to him at billiards, but he relieved me on that score by saying later that he was going abroad for the winter.

He had never been abroad before in his life, and nothing would convince him that foreigners take themselves at all seriously. He was a relic of the old school who will all feel their good lives wasted if they don't find Heaven run on strictly English constitutional lines and a solid policeman respectful outside the Golden Gate. He and the horse and the British Empire all seemed to go out of fashion together.

But with all his old-fashionedness he was a charming man to have dealings with, and Meadow

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Cottage was let to me without any hitch or trouble at all.

I have always held somewhat strict views about the running of a house—Rachael often said that I was an almost perfect embryonic bachelor; which is rather a stupid saying, when one considers it, and a totally characteristic one; she always did deny perfection to anyone but herself—and I brought Jukes and his wife in to look after the house and me, as they are used to my ways, Jukes having been my batman in the Service.

The rooms are very low and rather large for a cottage; at one time I can imagine it may have been a small farmhouse. I got Harrods to do the decorating, and very well they did it, too. In the front room—where I proposed to work—I had a beautiful, rich, creamy-coloured paper, which was a wonderful foil against the blackness of the oak furniture. The curtains were a very dark and comfortable blue (Liberty's), and when I got my little oak desk with its two slender silver candlesticks into the room the whole thing really did look rather nice.

And in that room on a hard, spindle-back chair (comfort always was detrimental to my mental activities) I did conscientiously three hours' work a day for nearly three months. For the rest of the day I just went out and got friendly with the

Cotswolds. I didn't waste all my time, however, because I managed to get through *The Forsyte Saga*, most of Donne (excellent), a great deal of Francis Thompson (a bit thundery), and, of course, my beloved Beerbohm. And, what I suppose is of more importance to me, underneath my somewhat affected exterior I began to acquire a little grounding in humility.

Humility looks a very funny word when you write it down, and I suppose that its connotation is not quite the one I want; but considered classically it will do.

I have become a convert to rusticism (which is a far better thing, believe me, than Ruskinism). I came to Bibury prepared to be wonderfully superior, and I feel that one might as well go about on tiptoe to overlook a mountain. I have often thought here of some rather learned things which Chickie was saying—years ago, it seems—about these being the last days of our civilization and of the imminent sense of catastrophe in Europe—things which, I remember, amused Vivian highly at the time, but which—I couldn't help feeling—interested him a good deal more than he would ever allow.

It was in May of 1919 that I was brought back with some suddenness into all the old ways of things.

I was walking home from Lechdale, and in Coln St. Aldwyn, just beyond the bridge, I saw a figure coming towards me which first I thought was reminiscent merely because it was typical of something which so much appeals to me and which is unique in the world, the English girl. Whatever Chickie says about our decadence no one else can produce people cut so cleanly and so straightly as do we.

It was typical, I saw, even in the distance, being tall and slender and walking strongly and being accompanied by dogs; but as it neared me it became more than typical—it became, so to speak, topical. For, extraordinarily, it was Dorothy Westlake.

And she cried in that rather nervous way which so becomes her, "Frank, you amazing person, I thought you were lost for ever."

And, upon my word, suddenly seeing her there where I had seen nothing for months but honest Hodges, I felt almost as though I *had* been lost.

Dorothy Westlake had been in my thoughts quite a lot just before I ran away to Bibury; she belonged to the rather intriguing class of people who one year are unsophisticated, almost insignificant girls and the next are decidedly attractive young women. I have often wondered what so

suddenly develops them; men generally, one vaguely supposes. . . .

And there in the green of that lane I sharply remembered how at the Tallboys' ball, at their place in Cadogan Gardens (where Stephané has that extraordinary parrot), Dorothy had looked enchanting in yellow, and how uncannily Mrs. Macready had interpreted my thoughts about her.

That ball it was, of course, at which Vivian and Rachael were so conspicuous by their united absences from the dancing.

Rachael and Vivian . . . very pleasant and diverting people to have in one's little world. People so eminently *possible*. . . . It is not a bit the amount of money which people have that makes them desirable, but most decidedly it is the way that they spend it. I always feel that I have been frightfully lucky in my introduction to life from that point of view, because although my father was strictly landed gentry and fed from infancy on Jorrocks and the *Morning Post*, he married, as all his people said, rather beneath him; and my mother—dear woman—was just plain business; good, honest ironware, and very lucrative too; and though she adapted herself splendidly—as only a woman could—to the local squire and village-meeting business yet there always remained ineradicable in her points of view which

were repugnant to my father but instructive to me.

She never could understand, for instance, that wearing a made-up tie really mattered, or that the direction of the port at dinner was absolutely sacrosanct.

And when I say that I was lucky in all that, I mean that having, as it were, two sources of origin I had my powers of appreciation of life tremendously widened.

Unless you are outside a thing you cannot see the whole of it—I often think that is why Kipling writes so well about the English landed class. You can enjoy a joke so much more if you can see both sides of it.

That is why, I suppose, even in the early days I sensed the potential earnestness underneath the careless exteriors of those three.

Polish never does away with passion; if you search your circle of friends you will find that those who keep a firm grasp of that great truth are they who get most fun out of life. Another truth which I want to compress into a somewhat neater epigram for my play is that flippancy is by no means synonymous with folly. Vivian, one of the best friends a man could have in many ways, is nearly always flippant, but you were blinder than a hard-baked brick if ever you conceived him

## A TEA-PARTY

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to be a fool. I suppose I know him better than do most, and a very interesting study he is. He does quite seriously think that Providence purposely created his kind superior to the rest of men (as in many ways they are), and that a boiled shirt will certainly be passport enough to Paradise. Hence his settled selfishness in life is really quite a logical and, in a way, tenable position—only that, as I think, it happens to be a mistaken one.

A most illuminating point and one that I (despite my father) failed to realize for some time is that fastidiousness in Vivian and his like really is deep-seated and is not by any means a pose.

He is no more particular about the care of his person than he is in the exercise of his passions, and hence his dealings with women have been much more circumscribed than his speech, which when lewd is exceedingly diverting, would lead you to believe.

So what with one thing or another I knew my Vivian pretty well when Rachael came into his life. "Came into his life" is a looseness which the bareness of the Cotswolds should certainly have purged out of me; I mean simply when I introduced them and they became acquainted.)

Rachael, of course, never bothers to classify her men much, and one day I'm afraid she will make

a hideous blunder from it. For instance, me she regards merely as a faint echo of Vivian, and she treats me accordingly!

But Rachael, dissect her how you may, is lovely. That remains. I think that she is quite the most lovely woman in London, and all men feel of her, I think, that such beauty is so rare, so precious, that they would willingly die sooner than that it should have any contact whatsoever with the meaner things of life.

And Vivian has found in her a spirit to match his own. Of that I am sure. Sure; partly because since he met her his flippancy has increased fourfold.

Rachael, of course, like all women, is fundamentally much more moral than any of her men. Vivian complains that all women are born with inherent middle-class morality, "and that, of course," he says, "hampers them." I think that he makes his point a little cruelly, but I recognize its truth, and Rachael, as I conceive it, is terribly afraid of Vivian. Certainly the completeness of his laughter at all things sacred (although not half of it is meant) is apt to be disconcerting.

And since Hugh was killed I have been increasingly afraid that those two will drift together. Poor Hugh, he was a very simple gentleman, and Rachael liked him very, very much.

## A TEA-PARTY

At one time I was very fond of Rachael (I am now for that matter), but, curiously, though I like to study subtlety in others I think that I should prefer simplicity as a lifelong companion—that sort of patent, straight-cut English simplicity which now in the lane I so much admired in Dorothy Westlake.

“But what are *you* doing here?” I cried. “I thought that you were charming London.” (Curious how immediately one slips back to Rachaelisms.)

“I am staying with the Grenfells,” she said, “at Coln St. Aldwyn Lodge, and there are a lot of young men there who have become rather boring, so I brought the dogs out for a walk.”

“I would ask you to tea,” I said, “but that I flatter myself that I am still a young man, and I suppose I too should be boring——”

“Don’t be silly.”

“—and also because there’s nobody else in the house but my housekeeper.”

“But how thrilling, and I’ve grown frightfully adventurous lately.”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“I’m simply *dying* to come; there’s such heaps to talk about.”

And so back to tea, at which the good Mrs.

Jukes (though just a trifle unenthusiastic) really excelled herself.

It was very cheering to have that eagerness in my darkened room and to hear all her complimentary remarks about my household gods. More and more it became evident that Dorothy had acquired poise (which, when all is said and done, is so much to be preferred to pose).

I flatter myself that I played the host rather well; at any rate Dorothy ate voraciously of everything, and then munching the final piece of toast she looked at me a little maliciously.

"And what," she said, "do you think of Rachael?"

"I think she's very charming."

"But what of her marriage?"

"Her *what*?" I cried.

"Marriage," said Dorothy. "Surely you knew?"

I had had no letters sent on from my flat or the club and was completely out of touch with the great gay world.

Dorothy found this hard to believe.

"Well, what do you think of it now?" she insisted.

"I suppose," I said, "that Vivian is a very lucky man."

"Vivian? *Vivian*?" She burst out laughing.

## A TEA-PARTY

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"But what a very nasty one for poor Rachael; what has she done to you?"

I was completely at sea. Dorothy demanded a cigarette.

"You utter barbarian," she said; "fancy not knowing all this. On the eighteenth of May, 1919, Miss Rachael Massinger was married at St. Margaret's to Mr. Charles Eádwig fyer-Wilson. I was a bridesmaid, silver tulle mostly."

"Charming, no doubt," was all I could say—and for several moments we stared at one another in silence.

"But *Chickie*," I said, "how—how very extraordinary!"

She nodded, smiling. "So most people thought, but I was more or less prepared for it."

"I am quite humble," I said in despair. "Please go on talking for a very long time."

"Rachael," said Dorothy, leaning back comfortably, "is quite the dearest girl in the world" (I let that pass) "and I do think that people have been rather horrid to her over all this, so I hope you are not going to be as well. Vivian is frightfully bored over it, and personally I'm rather glad, though of course he tries not to show anything, because he's so frightfully sure of being able to get whatever he wants, and I think that he really did want Rachael—especially when he heard that

she was engaged to Chickie. Vivian's like that.

"Rachael says that it all started at the Tallboys' ball; lots of things seem to have started then, I think; they always do at Stephané's, it's her good management." (I nodded.) "Rachael says that Chickie appeals to her maternal instincts so much, and that when she is with him she feels like a mother, but that when she is with Vivian she feels more like a mis—well, not a bit like a mother.

"And I think that Chickie is an awful dear and not so appallingly well satisfied with himself as is Vivian."

"How very interesting," I said—and so it was—and then, after a pause, "But do you think that she and Chickie really—that she is as fond of him as she was of Vivian?" (Curious how one boggles at the word "love"—a thoroughly English trait, that, of having a word which few other languages have got and then seldom using it without ridicule, bred of respect.)

"He is absolutely passionately devoted to her," said Dorothy.

"And she to him?"

"Oh, yes, I think so, but Rachael's heart is very complicated, I think."

"But *you* would know, if anybody, Doro?" (I used the diminutive for the first time since the Tallboys' ball—that significant date!)



"I was staying with Rachael on the night of their engagement," she said.

"And heard all about it?"

"I heard a lot about buns."

"Buns?"

"This engagement," said Doro, "is intimately connected with buns. It took place in a Lyons tea-shop." (A Lyons tea-shop and Rachael—I began to realize how hopelessly I had lost touch with things!)

"Well," I said, "apart from the purely confectionery side of the matter you think that Rachael is really in love?"

"Oh," Doro said in a tone that answered all my questions, "desperately so."

"With Chickie?"

Doro rose to go. "I think," she said, studying her gloves, "that dear Rachael is desperately in love with an image, poor Hughie's image, and that Chickie is the nearest approach to it she can find. I think," she said acutely, "that her love comes out of the emptiness of her heart rather than from its fullness; but," she cried, touching my hand lightly, "that is very, very disloyal of me, and you must quite forget it, please. Good-bye. I shall come for tea again."

And with her nervous little laugh she was gone.

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this, I am afraid. A lonely cottage in the Cotswolds is very charming, but it is no use denying that a great, rambling, friendly house, where the kitchen seems to extend all over the ground floor, and animals walk in and out of the hall just as they please, is much more charming still; especially when there are a lot of people to suit in the house.

They were a very jolly, broguey, heather-mixture-ish set of people, and Doro could not have found her young men half as boring as she made out, I'm afraid; at any rate she went walking with one or other of them much more often than commended itself to me. They were people whose idea of a joke ran more to noise than to niceness, and I felt the necessity for a little care when Doro and I had twice been left alone in the drawing room and suddenly plunged into darkness.

Altogether it was the sort of house in which it is always advisable to study one's bed carefully before getting into it; and nothing whatsoever abashed them.

I am quite sure that all the young men there—there were four of them—flirted quite outrageously with Doro, and that probably all of them had kissed her. That made me wild, as my views on the matter of kissing are somewhat antiquated (my maternal middle-class morality oozing out of

A TEA-PARTY

me, I suppose); it is a curious fact that among English people, who are usually so reserved and inward, there is a stratum in which quite cultured, educated English barbarians are irresistibly frank and open about their incipient indiscretions. I suppose I was accepted among them as not quite a brother barbarian, but a very promising proselyte.

It was a very healthy sort of house, and there was a lot of laughter in it, and I enjoyed it all tremendously. Much more so, indeed, than I realized until a slightly sprained ankle (acquired in an heroic defence of the bathroom against two other dead-heaters for first place at seven o'clock one evening) developed awkwardly the next morning and confined me to Meadow Cottage for a few days.

The sight of Mrs. Jukes' eternally solemn face continually appearing like a lugubrious owl round the corner of my bedroom door drove me very nearly to desperation, so that I could not possibly have looked as pleased as I felt when Dorothy's voice came up the stairs saying solemnly, "Mrs. Jukes, I am about to create a scandal by staying a long time in Mr. Martindale's room alone with him, so please look shocked." And stay a long time she certainly did, though I could have sworn (and indeed quite cheerfully did so) that my

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watch was lying when she started up to go. But her departure was almost bearable for the charming farewell she took of me, and Meadow Cottage suddenly seemed damnable.

So that what with thinking of one thing and another and looking at books that were no longer friendly and sucking at pipes that had ceased to be even nodding acquaintances I suddenly persuaded my leg to get better and struggled into a dinner-jacket, arguing with myself that it was a good deal better to set out and watch Doro dancing than to stay in and be harassed by Mrs. Jukes' asthmatic gossipings. Even to endure the Coln St. Aldwyn port—which was vile—was preferable to that. (Poor old Mrs. Jukes, dear homely soul, I had conceived a most unjustifiable "strafe" against her.)

So up to the Lodge I drove—Jukes' trap—and there I was pleasantly chaffed on my "lead-swinging," which did not disturb me in the slightest as Doro was dancing divinely.

Subconsciously I suppose I must have known even at the time what forced me out of bed and took me up to the Lodge in quite considerable pain all on a sudden; at any rate I knew when I got there, for sitting with Doro in the library, talking with restrained but pleasant intimacy of many

things and friends, I quite naturally asked her if she would be my wife.

She as naturally said "No," and I think both of us were a bit relieved to have the thing shelved for a moment.

"But, Frank," she said, putting her dear hands on mine, "that 'No' is really a lie. It is really 'Yes,' tremendously 'Yes.' But I do feel, dear, that I could not possibly say 'Yes' at present, until Rachael is more—is less unsettled. She is such a dear friend of mine, and I am so horribly afraid for her.

"Men do," she said, "such frightful, *blind* things just because women aren't obvious. . . . They seem to expect a woman's soul to be like an American city, and it's much more logically inconsequential like an English lane. And I do think," she went on slowly, "that you and I are going to be most closely concerned in Rachael's happiness somehow, and most desperately I want to help her.

"Please wait a little, dear Frank," she said.

And I, in the magnanimity of my victory, and there and then claiming the firstfruits of it, felt that I could well afford to wait.

Heaven wouldn't run away, I thought.

In anticipatory moments previously (and I suppose a would-be playwright has as many as any-

MOCKBEGGAR

body else) I had never for a moment imagined that a proposal would be like that. I had always been so much afraid of making a fool of myself and appearing ridiculous; of course, the truth is that the human heart can never—or seldom—separate the trivial altogether from the tremendous, and while you are busy adoring a woman's soul there is a little worm of mischief working in you that cannot help hoping that she doesn't snore.

I said something of this to Doro, and she said—wisely—that many people seemed to find engagements unlike their imaginings (which, though it did not strike me as such at the time, is rather a disquieting remark)!

It was in December, 1919, that Dorothy left Coln St. Aldwyn for Town. Originally she had come down there for a week-end; she had stayed for seven months; that, of course, was typical of Coln St. Aldwyn.

And very soon after she left, finding the Cotswolds doubly bare under the winter snows, I took my leave of the Biburians—who were charmingly grieved thereat—and went eagerly to pick up the thread of things almost forgotten in London.

CHAPTER VIII

JACOB B. BITES OFF *more than he can* CHEW

MR. JACOB B. STETSON, of whom you have heard (but whom, no doubt, you had completely forgotten), sat in his office thoughtfully chewing a cigar. How he made vast sums of money each year by chewing cigars nobody quite knew, but the two facts remain that he did make an incredible lot of money and that he did—as far as everybody could see—unendingly smoke cigars. Even Lord Lonsdale, it was rumoured, grew apprehensive and employed a private detective to ascertain exactly how many Mr. Stetson consumed.

Mr. Stetson's qualifications for his post were curious.

He knew no history whatsoever, regarding any year previous to 1912 (the date of the Confederate News-sheets Combine) as simply prehistoric.

He had never been abroad in his life except once during the War, when he was reverently escorted round what he imagined was the "Front."

The brightest spot in his geography was that he imagined Gibraltar to be at one end of the Suez Canal.

He held a theory that all men in all positions—including the Services—were there simply for greed of gain.

Poetry he considered an obvious sign of lunacy, and he had read but two books in his life: Smiles' *Self-help*, which he considered unnecessary, and Wilson's *Naked Truth*, because the title had misled him.

All this valuable knowledge naturally qualified him to be a leader of public opinion.

And his undoubted genius for divining what the public wanted to believe before they were conscious of it themselves made him simply invaluable to the Combine; of which he was the head, main-spring, god, and terror.

Mr. Philips, who at the moment was spreading himself before the fireplace, was Jehovah's mouth-piece. Jacob B. Stetson conceived the lies, Mr. Philips told them.

"How's the wife, Philips?" asked Jacob B.

"Fine, topping little gal is Hetty."

Jacob B. removed his cigar. "Lucky dog," he said, favouring Philips with a wink.

"What's the bother to-day?" Philips asked, ignoring the wink; he was one of those men who resent a display of greater capacity for caddishness than their own.

Stetson smiled a little regretfully; he had spent

many delightful anticipatory moments watching Miss Hetty Prince.

"This fellow Wild," he said.

"The *New Call*?"

"Um."

"What's his trouble?"

"He's getting a damned nuisance," Jacob B. said thoughtfully. "They're up to a hundred thousand again this week; I don't know how the hell they do it without any ads."

"Do they ad themselves anywhere?"

"How can they? We shut 'em out of all ours, of course, no matter what they're willing to pay—they've given up asking now as a matter of fact."

"I suppose we could do a series of sarcs at them; you know, gentle, depreciatory stuff——"

Jacob B. shook his head; he was a good journalist whatever else he might be. "Not worth it; all indirect aiding really; I learned that on the *Gazette*; I've told Wilkes that the words *New Call* aren't ever to come in the Combine's papers anywhere, and, by God, if ever I see them, I'll sack the staff."

Philips suppressed a yawn. "But why bother about him now particularly? Even with a hundred thou' he can't be hitting us much; he draws on an absolutely different circle, I should think."

"Seen to-day's *Call*?"

Philips shook his head.

"He's got hold of this Storer business."

Mr. Philips became suddenly much more attentive. "The devil he has," he exclaimed; "let's have a look."

He read the article through slowly, conscious that Stetson's eyes were subjecting him to a very close scrutiny. Mr. Philips read the article, a masterpiece of suggestion, through again, but his thoughts were not on it this time; curiously enough they were an exact reproduction of those of his chief. "Well, anyway he's in it so deep himself he daren't give me away"—and each of them was right. . . .

"He doesn't say much."

"Of course he doesn't," Stetson snapped; "would you? He's too damned clever; it's that young Wilson who wrote that—I'd know his blasted backhanders anywhere."

"If once it gets known," he said, "that we put Storer up for that stunt and financed him, well, you or I needn't trouble to look in the next Honours List. He doesn't say much this time, but he'll say a damned sight more later on, you can bet."

"He'll come pretty close to libel if he does," said Philips.

"And we dare prosecute, of course, and get the whole thing out in court? Besides, the kind of damned fool that Wilson is would sooner go to prison than let a quiet bit of business stay quiet."

"He won't sell out?"

Jacob B. Stetson pulled at his cigar thoughtfully. "Every man has his price," he said slowly. "There's nothing surer than that. But the trouble is to get him to admit it. That's what I wanted to see you about mostly; how's young Wilson fixed for money?"

"Supposed to get eight hundred from the *Call*."

"Anything else?"

"Not that I know of."

"Married, isn't he?"

Philips nodded. "Miss Massinger," he said.

"Not quite quick enough for you though, was he?" Stetson asked, grinning.

"Oh, I don't know," laughed Philips. "She's a rum gal."

"Well, you ought to know," sighed Stetson—he rather envied the more dapper Philips his amatory adventures—"but it's old man Wild I want to try and square first of all."

Philips nodded. "It's worth a bit," he agreed.

In due course Mr. Joseph Wild appeared for the process of being squared.

He was shown at once to Jacob B. Stetson's private sanctum, from which Mr. Philips diplomatically retired—he had a genius for retiring at precisely the right moment; a justly conceived fear of infuriated husbands had imbued him with it.

"Have a cigar?" asked Stetson genially.

"No," said Mr. Wild, sitting down in the most comfortable-looking chair. "What d'ye want? To buy me out?"

Stetson laughed heartily at the joke. "Shouldn't dream of it, my dear Mr. Wild," he said. "I know you much too well."

"Liar," said Mr. Wild, "but go on."

"What we have been thinking about," said Jacob B., lighting a fresh cigar, "is doing a bit of a deal which will be of advantage to both of us."

"Go on."

"We are willing," said Stetson, whose brain was magnificently capable of devising fresh schemes more quickly than his mouth found words to express them, "to go out of the South-western area altogether, say from Gloucester roughly south-west to the sea."

"Eh?" said Mr. Wild, starting forward a bit and feeling within himself the well-known preliminary symptoms of that desperate battle between his incurable joviality towards all men and

the serum of distrust against Stetson in particular with which fyer-Wilson daily inoculated him. "Go out of the South-western market?"

Stetson nodded.

"You mean, drop the *Gazette*?"

Stetson nodded again. "It's really not much our sort of country," he explained; "all agricultural, and you're doing so well there we thought you might be willing to come in with us and take it all over."

"How much d'ye want for it?"

"Well," said Stetson, "I've talked it over with Philips, and we both think we've got too much on our hands now that we've completed the amalgamation with the Northern group."

"Blasted monopoly," Mr. Wild said genially.

"We're willing to let you in at a nominal sum, free practically."

"Free? Getting afraid of us?"

Stetson laughed. "You're doing jolly well," he said. "I like to see the way you're coming on. The more journalism there is the better, I say. After all, we're all pretty well together; there isn't all that much difference between us really."

"Not about Storer, for instance——"

"Ah, you've got hold of the wrong end of the stick there, Mr. Wild; I can assure you of that. If I could explain it to you you'd see how wrong

you are. That Wilson of yours is a clever young fellow, but he don't know everything——"

"He usually knows what he's up to."

"But not always, Mr. Wild; he's made a bloomer this time, take my word——"

"Well, what is your explanation of the job?"

"I'll come to that. As I was saying you're doing well, and there's really room for you in that part of our market, and if you come in it will relieve us of a lot of work which we can't very well handle at present."

"And you're going to let us in free?"

"Absolutely, Mr. Wild." There was a complete finality about Stetson's voice that very nearly convinced the mere shadow of Chickie's hatred that remained in the cumbersome Wild. "Well," he said, "if it's a genuine offer it's better than I expected of you, Stetson, I must say that."

Jacob B. laughed genially. "We're none of us as bad as we're painted, Mr. Wild," he said. "I've sometimes thought you haven't been quite fair to us in the past, you know; it's easy to impute a bad motive for anything. Of course, we all know what young folks are—we've been young ourselves, eh?—and if Wilson is a bit hot-headed and hasty at times I suppose we mustn't grumble."

"Well," said Mr. Wild, "he certainly is a de-

terminated young man on some points, but he's as nice a fellow as you could meet——"

"Don't doubt it," Stetson broke in heartily, "don't doubt it, Mr. Wild. I've liked the look of him ever since I first saw him; but he hasn't had quite the experience, perhaps, that you and I have had; that's what's necessary to fix a deal like this."

"Do I understand, Stetson, that you will go out of the South-western area and give us an option on it absolutely free?"

"Absolutely free, Mr. Wild. Of course," he added as an afterthought, "there will be some sort of agreement embodying certain conditions."

Mr. Joseph Wild nodded. "Conditions," he said slowly. "I think I had better send for fyer-Wilson."

"Send for him now?"

"I think so."

"Well, it's just as you like, Mr. Wild, of course," said Jacob B., "but I must say it does seem a pity just when we were coming to terms so easily."

"But he's such a nice young fellow," Mr. Wild reminded him. "May I use your phone?"

"Anything you like," Stetson said, going out to consult the attendant Philips, "anything you like."

Mr. Philips was close outside.

"Well," he asked, "hooked him?"

Stetson shook his head savagely. "The silly old fool's sending for that damned Wilson fellow, and I was just getting round him."

"Well, don't ruffle young Wilson; you may be able to talk him round."

Mr. Wild's telephonic conversation was brief, but apparently to the point. "Wilson's coming round," he said. "He doesn't seem satisfied about the conditions you mention."

In due course Mr. Charles fyer-Wilson came round as fast as an overtipped taxi-driver could bring him. Stetson saw to it that Mr. Wild and his editor had no chance of private consultation before being shown into the presence of Mr. Philips and himself.

"Good morning, Mr. Wilson," said Stetson with his ponderous geniality.

"Morning," said Chickie, ignoring the proffered hand. In certain directions he was capable of being as rude and uncompromising as anybody could wish. "What's all this about taking over your South-western area?"

Messrs. Stetson and Philips entered into joint explanation. They explained, they expounded, they adduced figures, they cracked little jokes, they interlarded their reasons with complimentary allusions to the *New Call*; what one could not

invent in the way of fictitious representation the other could, and did; they beamed, they unbent, they mopped their foreheads with handkerchiefs, they coughed, they became hoarse. It was obvious that only a particularly brainless piece of rock could have remained unconvinced by so much eloquence. Juries would have laughed at parricide and been hilarious over bigamy after it.

At length they stopped.

Mr. Wild looked admiringly at them and doubtfully at fyer-Wilson.

"Well, Wilson," he began, "what——"

"What about the conditions?" asked that stubborn person.

Stetson handed him half a sheet of notepaper, on which he had scribbled some remarks.

Chickie read them through slowly, and then very thoughtfully made a spill of them and lit a cigarette. "Hell," he remarked through a cloud of smoke. "We'll see you damned before we have anything to do with it."

For a few moments four people sat in silence looking somewhat fixedly at each other; Stetson shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"You're a damned fool," he said.

"And you're a damned fraud," said fyer-Wilson. "We've got you cold over this Storer business, and you know it and you're getting fright-

ened of us; your conditions practically amount to bribing us to hand over the control of the *New Call* to you. A lot we should hear of Mr. Storer if you got hold of it."

"Go your own way," Stetson said, sulkily turning over some papers.

"Oh, thanks very much," fyer-Wilson said, rising. "Come on, Mr. Wild——"

"But, mind you," Stetson went on, "we've made you a fair proposal, and you've turned it down before you've seen it almost; well, from now we're out for you; I tell you that plainly; we're out to smash you from now on. We've got the power to do it and, by God, we will do it. We'll squeeze you out of every market in England; I don't care if it costs the Combine a year's profits, we'll fix you so you're not selling a single copy in twelve months' time."

"You overestimate the power of organized lying," said fyer-Wilson. "Good-day."

Following which Lyceumish declaration of war there were, of course, consultations in the various camps.

Chickie found it a little hard to impress the correctness of his attitude on Mr. Wild, who, as a dog after a forbidden bone, kept looking rather regretfully towards missed opportunity.

"But think of the South-western market," he pleaded, "just where we were hoping for——"

"Think of a South-western fiddlestick," said fyer-Wilson rudely. "We should have been dead in a month if they had got hold of us."

"But they seemed to want to be so fair——"

fyer-Wilson laughed. "My dear old man," he said, "when will you let it be impressed on you that Messrs. Stetson and Co. are perfectly capable of cutting a man's throat with one hand while shaking hands with him with the other."

From all of which you will no doubt have gathered that of all the possible lines open to it for development Chickie's character had chosen the very worst. He was a fanatic and fêd on nothing but the morrow; which is very unsettling to one's digestion and very boring to one's wife.

That broad grasp of the futility of all things human which anchored Vivian's life, or of their fineness that had explained Hugh's, was wanting in Chickie. Chickie had become obsessed with the idea that everything in life mattered desperately; and when one is fool enough to believe that, well, of course, things *do* matter desperately.

No careful people are broadminded.

Throughout life every man, to remain sane, must have a standard in comparison with which everything else whatsoever is relatively of no im-

MOCKBEGGAR

portance. Vivian's standard was himself; Hugh's had been his Faith; Chickie had none. He kept comparing life with itself, and of course it looked very big and ugly and threatening; and Rachael in anxious bewilderment saw him slipping away, worn in useless buffetings with phantoms. . . .

Poor Rachael . . . poor, silly Chickie . . .

Over renewed cigars the consultation in the other camp went forward.

"Well," asked Philips, "what's next?"

"We can smash 'em, of course," said Stetson thoughtfully, "but can we do it before they let out all this Storer business?"

"Thought you said that every man had his price," Philips twitted. "What's his?"

"I did," said Stetson, "and it's true, I'm dead sure of that. My old dad always told me that, and I've never known it fail. . . ."

"Well, what's his figure?"

"It isn't always money," said Stetson; "*you* ought to know that . . ." and in silence two rather beastly men regarded one another with that covert distrust which is the unfailing mark of the brute the world over.

CHAPTER IX

PROBLEM PIE

NOW I am very sorry for you if you are not a dancing man—or woman—first, because you will always be somewhat of a social outcast; and second, because you will become unfairly prejudiced against this remarkable book. Because now you are going to another dance. It is quite inevitable, as you must see when you stop to consider your company. No dance was ever complete without Vivian, and the trend of Stephané's spiritual life had been completely altered by the refusal of some minister to answer a polite note from her inquiring whether there was likely to be a good floor in Paradise. Moreover, it is quite interesting, because on few other occasions do people display, and betray, themselves so satisfactorily as at a dance. To dance naked round a fire is a very old and primitive tribal instinct, and to dance in a stiff shirt round a bottle of Pol Roger is a very reasonable development of that instinct. No civilization which has produced the fox-trot and the saxophone need fear that it has flourished in vain. It need have no doubt at all on the point.

And if the two young men in St. Jermyn Street were not consciously cogitating all these things they were at least upheld by an inward conviction of the moral rectitude of what they were about to do. They were in that rather troubled mental state when the distant pleasure of being dressed weighs doubtfully against the more immediate irksomeness of dressing. And one of them, a young man rather Lovat-Fraserian in aspect, said to the other, "What exactly is this show you're dragging me to, Frank?"

"Its impeccability is fully guaranteed by Lady Tallboy," said Frank Martindale, "if that can be considered a recommendation."

Vivian made a grimace. "How is it," he asked, "that our own little crowd of reasonable people never seems to forgather now?"

"But don't they?"

"Only lesser lights; Rachael our sun, for instance, is not coming, is she?"

"But that, I suppose," he went on, "is one disastrous effect of being married; perhaps she herself has a son coming."

Frank was quite genuinely annoyed. "Don't exercise your coarse wit over Rachael," he said. "She is not a fit subject for it; I think, Vivian, that you really should differentiate between the undesirable and the unattainable."

And Vivian, not one whit perturbed outwardly by so polite a reminder of his defeat, laughed easily. "Very few girls," he made answer, "are fundamentally undesirable and still fewer," he said quietly, "are unattainable. But seriously, Frank, and with due deference to your Puritanical prejudices, why should not Mrs. fyer-Wilson (complete with hyphen) disport herself at a dance? Is there any valid reason why I should have to partner second-rate dancers instead of the one girl in town who can dance as well as I can? And then," he went on, "one is solicitous about her husband's health. Why should Chickie take permanent root in that extraordinary office of his, where that funny fat god with baggy trousers presides? Seriously, I am concerned about him."

"Yes," said Frank, "you would be. But still I do agree that it would do Rachael good to have a little gaiety occasionally."

"'A little gaiety'—oh, admirably put. Well, what about it, shall we ask her?"

"There are telephones and things," said Frank vaguely.

"There are," Vivian agreed, suddenly rising with great decision, "and I will use same. Come and hold my hand."

And presently, through one of the few really fairylike wonders that your broad-browed men of

science have produced, Vivian was able to ring a bell, a tiny, tinkling bell, that sounded silvery in that harmonic house in Half Moon Street—that sounded sudden and engaging in the hollowness of a heart therein. Rachael, for very excitement of what it might be, leapt up to answer it before Otter could Otterize towards it.

And to her first "Hullo" Vivian, expecting a maid, said haughtily, "Is Mrs. fyer-Wilson in, please?"

Said Rachael, quite aflutter with so unwonted an adventure, "She is."

That silken voice was unmistakable.

"Mrs. Charles Eadwig fyer-Wilson," teased Vivian, "complete with hyphen?"

"Oh, Vivian," she cried, "you prehistoric man. Where have you been for the last two million years? Have you grown beards and things?"

"Beaver," said Vivian solemnly and without any reason at all except that telephonic conversations (like the only other form of speech which we conduct with some one we can't see—prayers) are apt to degenerate into the ridiculous. "I have been in a monastery bewailing you."

"And I," said Rachael loyally, "have been in Heaven bewailing you."

"We are both out of place," Vivian laughed.

"But why from somewhere unknown are you

mysteriously sending your voice to Half Moon Street to-night?"

"Because," said Vivian, "to-night is the ninth of November."

"Really, but how very alliterative. . . ."

"And the time," Vivian said, "is almost a quarter to seven."

"How extraordinarily precise you have become, Vivian Dalmeny; please be a little more carelessly expansive."

"And at half-past eight of this said evening, the ninth of November," went on Vivian, "there is to be a certain gathering of quite impossible people leavened into a reasonable lump by a party conducted thither by Stephané, my unspeakable sister, to which you are hereby and now invited."

"A dance . . ." cried Rachael, "oh, a dance . . . I should love to . . . but Chickie . . ." she said. . . .

"Does the virtuous husband disapprove of dancing?" Vivian mocked.

"Don't be silly, Vivian," she said, "but he comes in so late and so hungry and so irritable and altogether so desperately *mannish*; how could——"

"But, damn it," cried Vivian, really somewhat exasperated, "Chickie has feet—large ones; I remember noticing them. He must come and dance too."

MOCKBEGGAR

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"He is a jour—an editor," Rachael said severely, "and very busy."

"But it would do him good," argued Vivian, "and, besides, it isn't his press night."

"How on earth did you know that?" cried Rachael. "Do you read the *New Call*?"

"God forbid; do you? Frank just told me; he knows all these things. Ring up your harassed husband and ask him, Rachael. . . ."

"I should love to come . . ." that silver voice said, full of regretful doubt.

"But you always used to do what you loved to," cried Vivian. "This is tragic. Frank and I will ring him up and secure him. Frank, by the way, is itching to speak to you, but his good manners are powerless against my selfishness. . . ."

"Dear Frank . . ." Rachael said with a sudden flash of a forgotten manner, "dear men . . . oh, I should love to dance with you all again."

"Ah, that was reminiscent, Rachael," Vivian cried delightedly, "that was *you*. . . ."

"But can you persuade Chickie?" asked Rachael anxiously. "He is a very important person, you know, and most zealous about his work. Do you think you can? . . ."

"Think?" Vivian laughed. "My best persuasive efforts have never been known to fail. Never,

Rachael," he said. "Please put on your nicest frock at once."

Rachael ran from the phone with a delighted little laugh. "Therèse, Therèse," she cried, "my black frock at once, the one from Isobel's. And my hair—oh, consternation, why is one never ready for these things. . . ."

Under Lady Tallboy's careless and irresistible shepherding a most noisy and loud-laughing piece of leaven was brought to the "impossible show."

Vivian, more than usually confident that his were the best-cut clothes in the room, was the loudest of them all; and people covertly noticing him thought how lucky his partners were and said, "How frightfully noisy Mr. Dalmeny is," in an offended sort of way. Superiority in others is regarded by so many as a sort of vice.

"Vivian," cried Stephané his sister, "for Gawd's sake, be quiet; you are quite the loudest lout imaginable, and what on earth," she asked, "have you done with Frank?"

"Yes, isn't Frank coming?" asked Dorothy Westlake.

"Frank," said Vivian, growing suddenly quiet, "has been detained on important business; but now," he added quickly, glancing towards the

door, "he is here complete with Rachael and her busy husband."

And in the doorway, lo, Frank was there complete with Rachael and her busy husband.

"Rachael," cried everybody, "oh, how splendid!" And for a moment there was in Rachael's heart intense gratitude for such gladness; never did abdicated queen come back to a more empty throne.

"Where *have* you been?" Stephané cried. "I thought Chickie had devoured you."

"I have been domesticated," Rachael said stoutly, "and very nice it is; but now," she said, "I will dance."

Whereat she was besieged by requests, and smiling divinely, as of old, she proceeded exactly to apportion her programme between the eager men.

"What do you think of Chickie?" asked Rachael. "Isn't it noble of him to forsake the *New Call* for the old vice?"

And Chickie emerged into the light of Rachael.

"Chickie," cried Dorothy, "how pale you are! Is it the fashion or merely the 'flu?"

"He looks as if he had spent a night errant," Vivian said. "Chickie, I'm surprised at you, and how is the *New Call*? Still a little hoarse?"

Chickie, fingering his tie nervously, because they are very hard things to make satisfactorily with

## PROBLEM PIE

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but one hand, laughed, and the facial movement served only to deepen the shadows under his eyes, throwing them into an even intenser black. "The *Call* is thriving," he said, "but it's a bit of a drag at times. It is so jolly to see you all again."

And jolly it must have been; poor Chickie, he had nearly forgotten the earnestness, the almost savageness, with which one must shake life to get the best out of it.

Immediately the band commenced—a jolly band full of saxophones and motor-horns and things; most musical.

Said Rachael, the queenly manner most easily reassumed, "My first dance I shall dance with my first husband," and Chickie, blushing with proud gratitude, took her into his arms. "That was very nice of you," he said quietly after they had danced a minute or two in silence.

"You stupid Chickie," she said, "you should take me out so much more often. See how badly you dance."

And Chickie, crestfallen, was silent again.

Not, of course, that he did see how badly he danced; no man was ever capable of that, particularly when dancing with Rachael. He was merely conscious of a growing incredibility at the back of his mind that he should for so long have forsaken so much light and laughter, so much

## MOCKBEGGAR

release and relief. There floated across his mind the picture of Adams—shirt-sleeves, tousled hair, gold-rimmed glasses constantly mislaid; Adams in gallant combat with the bi-weekly leader; and in threatening prospect he saw on the morrow himself in that same pitiless arena of shaded light, coatless, breathless, almost witless; creating, erasing, pleading, threatening, cajoling, in anger smashing, in desperate *furor* re-creating, shouting, swearing, almost sobbing in the frenzied race against the clock—going to press; that was the disturbing vision that came to Chickie, and looking over that room of gay and gallant folk a certain sense of futility came upon him. . . .

There was an end of the first dance, and Rachael said in pretty queenliness, "If I danced once or twice with you I might teach you to perform quite creditably," and Chickie laughed assent, wondering vaguely why to be teased by this adorable creature at his side had lost just that fullness of delight that once it held for him. . . .

Vivian appeared, claiming the next dance—clean, upright, admirable.

Rachael slipped an arm through Chickie's. "I ought to teach my husband," she said; "he needs it."

"Vivian needs lessons in humility," Chickie laughed, disengaging her arm, "much more than

I do. Take him and tell him how badly he dances."

"But Vivian is so energetic, and I feel so lazy," Rachael protested. "Please, Chickie. . . ."

He shook his head laughingly.

"She can't trust you, Chickie," Vivian twitted him. "What a gay dog you must be. I said you looked dissipated."

Chickie laughed, but was immovable, and to the opening of the music Rachael glided away in Vivian's arms.

Chickie watched them round the room—the handsome man and the strange, supple woman, the almost too queenly thing that was his wife. . . .

Do other men, he wondered, kneel in such adoration of her beauty, but in such bewilderment at it as do I? Do others come so nearly to understanding her completely, but with such utter ultimate failure as is mine? A little discontentedly his tired eyes wandered round the room, and last of all they lighted on the thing nearest him—Mr. Frank Martindale.

And with Frank he chatted of this and of that, of the admirable adequacy of the music and of the lamentable inadequacy of the room, of Stephanè's irrepressibility, of Vivian's gaiety, of Rachael's divinity, and of several other small matters which loomed large on their limited horizons. Chickie

passed a quick hand over troubled eyes, and Frank—it was characteristic of him—noted the action and its significance.

"You are a fool, Chickie," he said angrily, "to overdo it at that beastly *Call* of yours. Can't that maniac Wild understand that people have limits?"

"Oh, it's all right," said Chickie. "It isn't Wild. And, besides," he added inconsequentially, "does anybody ever really understand anything or anyone?"

"Oh, that's a futile remark. Hullo, there' Mrs. Hetty."

"And who," asked Chickie, his eyes and thoughts on Rachael, "is Mrs. Hetty?"

But as Frank was busy seeking an opportunity and at the best of times was not very expansive in explanation the question went unanswered.

In due course the opportunity sought by Frank arrived, and unostentatiously he crossed the room to seat himself beside Miss Dorothy Westlake, who in green looked very sweet and restful.

"It is reassuring to see Chickie and Rachael at a dance together," she said. "Music has a lot to do with matrimony."

"But is it promising?" asked Frank, who for all his patience and restraint was growing very desirous of that quiet fragrance beside him.

## PROBLEM PIE

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"Oh, my dear, don't be so cruelly unselfish; why should we bother our heads about other people's marriages?"

"Because," she made answer, "our heads are quite the levellest of the lot. Rachael lives in depths of feeling which we are spared, and Vivian is much too callous, though he is collected; so only you and I are left," she said, smiling prettily, "dear, sane Frank; and we must be fairy god-parents and see that everybody else is happy before we become too much absorbed in one another to notice anything." And with such promise of future satisfaction did she look at Frank that he was forced to half-hearted assent.

"It is curious," she went on, "but have you noticed how fair Providence is in these things? I mean, how people seem to get out of marriage exactly what they expect from it. Rachael looked, I think, for some intangible spirituality, some intercourse of congenial spirits which she could not well express; and things intangible and inexpressible are all she has found so far, I'm afraid. And look at *Stephané*." She nodded to where Lady Tallboy was speaking to Chickie. "She hoped only for an intense animalism, and though there is so much more than that in Tallboy yet all the finer things she misses, and what she hoped for she obtains."

And Frank, wondering that such balanced and subtle criticism should come from so young and vivacious a source, glanced idly to where the moving flame of Stephané's dress made telling contrast with the settled black of the man she spoke to.

Said Lady Tallboy—to whose mind it was a gross waste of good material that a man should ever be idle—"Chickie, you slacker, why don't you dance?"

"Slackness," Chickie assured her, "not chosen but enforced, for who is there to dance with?"

"But with me," she cried, and in the same breath, "only not this time, because this I've promised to Tallboy, and you husbands are frightfully exacting—though sometimes satisfying—persons; but why not with Hetty? . . . Hetty!"

In response to which frenzied cry there came towards them a woman. "Chickie is miserable and wants a partner, Hetty," said Lady Tallboy, "and I am sure you get on very well together." There was the usual English glumness appropriate to the occasion.

"But don't you know one another?" cried Stephané.

"I—I'm afraid not," Chickie answered, a little disturbed at having unknown females thrown at him so summarily.

## PROBLEM PIE

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"How terrible, I am so sorry, I thought that everybody knew Hetty. Let me be ceremonious," and in the grand manner Tallboyesque she announced, "Mrs. Philips, Mr. Ch—fyer-Wilson. Now, for goodness' sake, enjoy yourselves," and she was gone.

"Do we dance?" asked Chickie, smiling lamely, and Mrs. Philips assented.

It quickly became very evident that Mrs. Philips did dance—in point of fact she was incomparably the finest dancer in the room, not even Rachael excepted. Chickie felt suddenly fit to dance in the courts of Heaven.

"I am disappointed," she said suddenly in that softness of voice which was so seductive.

"It's want of practice," Chickie said bravely, "but I'll improve as we go on."

"Not your dancing," she cried. "I find that delightful, Mr. fyer-Wilson. It was in the matter of the introduction. I had hoped that you would remember me." Chickie was aghast; it seemed incredible that such pleasantness could ever have been known and forgotten. "I—I—I'm frightfully sorry," he hedged, "of course—let me see——"

"How like a man!" she teased him, smiling intimately. "You do make us feel how frightfully unimportant we are compared to all your

offices and golf and things. Were you never at La Comique?"

"Infrequently; but why La Comique?"

"*Sic transit gloria*," laughed Mrs. Philips surprisingly. "Shall we avoid that very fat couple . . . good . . . once Hetty was known at La Comique, once I was a prince in Babylon. . . ."

Amazing light, doubtfully of disappointment and delight, flooded what of Chickie's mind was not devoted to the intricacies of dancing. "Hetty—Miss Hetty Prince?" he cried. "How——"

"How what—dangerous?"

"Delightful." They both laughed.

"But that was very nice of you," she said, leading him to sit down; "that almost made me feel like Miss Hetty Prince again."

"Being married," she said, lighting a cigarette, "is a very curious business."

There was silence.

"Are you married, Mr. fyer-Wilson?" she asked.

Chickie nodded. "My wife is here," he said.

"How nice; my husband hardly ever comes out with me. He's such a dear, of course, but it's so easy for two people not to share one point of view about things, don't you think?"

"Er—Mr. Philips—well, I'm afraid—oh, not—er—Philips of the *Telegram*?"

Hetty nodded with averted eyes.

"Ye-e-es," said Chickie, feeling utter amazement that two people so utterly dissimilar should ever have attempted to achieve a common viewpoint, "that is—er—no, or rather I have met him in business, you know."

"Of course, you are in Fleet Street, aren't you?"

Chickie nodded.

"But how thrilling! Do tell me about it."

"Most women find it boring," laughed Chickie.

"But not I; I think it's wonderful. Only," she added with a despairing little gesture, "it takes up so much of Lionel's time, and I do so hate being lonely."

"Yes," agreed Chickie a little absently, "loneliness is *awful*."

She glanced at him quickly. "But I thought men were too busy to be lonely."

"Oh, it's not a question of *doing* things altogether, is it? It's a question of feeling them, too."

"And doesn't your—don't people feel with you? Aren't they sympathetic?"

"Oh, it's my fault," Chickie said loyally, "and of course it is so much out of Rachael's line altogether, it seems ludicrous to connect her with

it; yet—oh, well, of course, everybody is made differently, I suppose.”

“That is what makes marriage a queer business, I think,” she said. “People turn out differently from what we expected, and it’s so horrible not to be understood in life, not to have friends.”

“But surely,” said Chickie gallantly, “you have plenty.”

“Oh, heaps of friends,” she said, “but not the One Friend I want”; and her eyes said things that her lips as yet dare not; nor to Chickie’s simple honesty was there disclosed any of the blatant soulfulness of this; none of the threadbare conventionality of this desecrating mouthing of sacred phrases was apparent to him; he saw only a woman unfairly lonely and unhappy. In any dealings with women Chickie was much too straightforward to see the dropping of the handkerchief. Honesty is the prehistoric bow and arrow against all the thundering battery of a woman.

“It is so fine,” she said, “to have Some One you can tell everything to, who understands you through and through, isn’t it?”

Chickie nodded seriously.

“And I’m so sure,” she said, laying a hand on his arm, “that I could help you so much in your work.”

## PROBLEM PIE

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"But you are in the enemies' camp, I'm afraid," he cried half seriously.

She looked a little fixedly into his eyes. "Enemies," she said. "Oh, you and I—Hetty and Chickie—I have so few real friends," she said, "I could not afford that. . . ."

Now that, with all its frightful futility, its glaring "best-sellerism" quite naked and unashamed, its blurge, its confident appeal to the streak of sentimental housemaidism that runs in all of us—that was terrible.

And you and I, now twenty-six or-seven and very much experienced men of the world, we know far too much of women to be deceived by that; and if Chickie has not been quite so promiscuously inclined in these matters as have we, well, more fool he to get married, that's all. Cynicism is of so much more practical use than chivalry. We don't come clean to marriage, but at least we come cunning.

That is twaddle which should deceive no *man*, no "smoking-room man," as Rachael once damned us; but the more terrible part of it is that women, dear, delightful, dangerous, desperate, and devouring darlings, choose their weapons with such uncanny skill. . . .

While this primitive bludgeoning was going on at one end of the room, at the other, over two

very small cups of coffee, there was a battlefield of much more restraint. So restrained, indeed, with points so nice and subtle, as to be hardly noticeable.

What was noticeable first above all was Rachael herself clad in "the one from Isobel's" which Therèse had obediently brought her. Isobel, one thought, must be a person of iron will to be able to part with such a frock as that.

It was almost savagely simple.

The supple form of Rachael went, as it were, wrapped in night, and that simple piece of blackness Rachael informed with intense vitality; she added depth to what was a shimmering surface, and it became a gleaming gloom.

She walked superbly swaying, her untrammelled arms like two white prayers of hope from the darkness of some divine despair, and all men seeing her a little held their breath.

There was thrown about her that restraint, that grace, that barbaric beauty, which could make any man a king. "Royal Rachael," thought many, "see where she walks a natural queen," but those of the grosser sort felt themselves avenged in asking, "Queen or quean?"

And it says much for the inherent grace of man that against beauty so carefully planned, effect

## PROBLEM PIE

so studiously achieved, the uniform of evening dress was quite unashamed.

The breastplate of a boiled shirt covers a multitude of skins, and not all men, of course, could have stood the test successfully; the short and serious, the crumpled and careworn, would have looked ludicrous, but Vivian, the lithe and lengthy, the debonair, devil-may-care Vivian, sat there smiling and self-satisfied, almost as great an ornament to the room as was Rachael herself.

Many critical feminine eyes that sought Rachael and her frock got no nearer to it than to stop at Vivian by her side. His dark suggestiveness. . . . Oh, to all but the most unimaginative of them he really did seem to be a good and sufficient reason for dishonesty. . . .

And Rachael, that cynosure of neighbouring lies, said to her partner, "Vivian, it is very nice to dance again; I had almost forgotten how to."

"And I," Vivian said, "had quite done so. Nobody does dance but you."

"Please," asked Rachael, after a little silence of satisfaction, "do you like my dress? It's my new one from Isobel's."

"I'm afraid I've hardly noticed it," he said lamely; "it all seemed so much a part of you."

"But what a compliment," Rachael cried with that delighted little clap of the hands which was

such a taking trick of hers. "Oh, Vivian, I feared for a moment that you were going to be a frightful country clown over that, and you were no less than a courtier. For you are a courtier," she went on slowly, "and I do like it very much in you. Didn't you say something once, Vivian, about living life with a gesture?"

Vivian nodded. "Life should be lived with a flourish," he said, "not a family."

"Marriage," he said in his sage-iest manner, "robs us of our capacity for being surprised, and that puts one at a great disadvantage; you once said, you know, Rachael, that you thought husbands horrible."

"I utterly deny it," cried Rachael sharply; "and, besides, we were trifling at the time."

"Tremendous trifling," sighed Vivian in regret. "Dear me, Chickie must be a very wonderful person."

"None other could be my husband; but what makes you say so?"

"He has done what I thought never any man could do—he has monopolized you."

"Monopolized?" Rachael cried. "But how silly! Marriage is not monopoly."

"Well, it's a very large vested interest," grumbled Vivian; "it's a Trust."

Rachael looked at him queerly for a moment.

## PROBLEM PIE

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"How very true," she said. "I was forgetting that."

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Their supper-party was perhaps just a little too hilarious to go unsuspected, and I don't know that any of them enjoyed it very much except Frank.

Rachael had an extraordinary tale to tell, which she told tricked out in Rachaelisms so that nobody really believed her although what she said was quite true. "I have," she said solemnly, "been accosted."

"Splendid," Vivian said sourly. "What did it feel like?"

"It is very thrilling," Stephané cried, "and it makes me feel very Eveish."

"It always makes me feel very bored," Vivian yawned. "But do go on. Did he do it handsomely?"

"With a gesture?" Rachael teased. "Oh, not with a gesture, Vivian, much more with a grunt."

"Who was he?" Chickie asked—so seriously that everybody laughed.

"Enter jealous husband," Vivian said. "Doesn't he do it well?"

"It is very nice to have people who are jealous about one," said Rachael.

"Is it?" Vivian looked at her. "You must be happy then."

"It was," Rachael went on, ignoring him, "a very extraordinary person; he addressed me by name, but I am sure I have never seen him before; but then, of course, everybody knows me."

"Flippant wife," interrupted Vivian. "It's as good as a play."

"And he actually said that he thought I looked lonely—I, lonely——"

Chickie laughed. "How silly!" he said.

"—and he was duly snubbed for his pains."

("Virtuous wife rejecting overtures with contumely"—this from Vivian, still in a bad temper.)

"What is he like?" asked all the girls.

Said Rachael in cruel delight at the dissection, "He is of medium height, darkish, very ugly, and he looks extremely wicked."

"Sounds like Tallboy," said Vivian.

"Not attractively wicked like Vivian," Rachael went on, "but rather repulsively so, and his hair is very greasy and shiny."

"It's the saxophone player," Stephané said. "I saw Rachael ogling him dances ago."

"Is it really one of the band?" Chickie asked.

"It was Vivian in disguise," Tallboy guessed; "he's a desperate character."

"Well," Vivian said, "I would even make my

hair 'greasy and shiny,' to use Rachael's disgusting expression, if I thought that thereby she might be a little softened towards me."

"Softened!" cried Dorothy Westlake, with an undeceiving sort of smile. "Why, she needs most desperately to be hardened."

"I must be the villyun in this 'ere drammer," Vivian said. "Chickie, beware."

But Chickie refused to beware; he even neglected to hear, for he was gazing across the room to where sat Mrs. Hetty Philips rather tragically pale and listless. Thought Chickie, "She is in that mood of frightful helplessness against life that I know so well. Things are whirling round her as in a pitiless wind, and she sits lonely in the midst of them. . . . Oh, God, a press night to-morrow. . . ."

"No," said Rachael to all these guesses, "it was that man at whom Chickie is gazing so intently and who is now sitting with that rather vampish-looking thing in flame-colour."

"Haughton," cried Vivian, "an absolute outsider. But, of course, if Stephané will ask these people to dances we are ever likely to be insulted by them."

"That's Mrs. Philips he's talking to," Chickie observed, "and I don't think she looks at all vampish; she looks rather tired, I think."

and for some time he gazed into the fire, and then with an air of humorous desperation he said, "Well, I have, Frank, in a way; you know that I'm not one of those funny people who go about falling in love and being romantic and that sort of thing, but I really was very fond of Rachael. She did seem so extraordinarily *above* life, just like me, and I thought that we could have so much fun together, laughing our way through things—and then suddenly in a fit of seriousness she marries. She marries Chickie."

"Chickie's a very nice fellow."

"Very nice; but, good Lawd, Frank, ain't he a dull dog? Is there anything in life to justify his eternal sobriety? Can you really put up a defence for treating things seriously as he does? And Rachael is positively swallowed up in it all. Rachael," said Vivian darkly, "has lost, and I think she knows it."

"However," he added, pouring himself out another drink, "little things like that mustn't worry one. Here's to their eternal happiness, which I suppose is most righteously assured."

Had any other but Vivian said these things Frank would have used the only monosyllable suitable to the occasion, but he had too much sympathy with Vivian's disappointment to judge him harshly. You never knew how much Vivian

PROBLEM PIE

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had missed a thing until you heard him laugh at it, and then you could only guess. He was one of those, Frank knew, who have one chance, and one chance only, to swallow up selfishness in sanity, and that chance gone—and they are too proud to fight for it—they build themselves a fortress of more impregnable cynicism than ever. Like your fervent atheist who not only stoutly denies the existence of a God, but vehemently hates Him into the bargain, Vivian could not be content to ignore what he affected to forget; he must either love it or hate it.

So Frank, in his wisdom, said, "Well, Viv, mistaken people are often very lonely, you know, and much too proud to show it."

Vivian yawned. "Rachael's much too lovely to be lonely," he said, "if she's got any sense."

Rachael, riding home with Chickie in the taxi, felt suddenly much more closely married than she had done for a long time; with a display of intimacy rare in her she sat quite close to her husband and slipped her arm through his. "What a jolly evening, Charles Eadwig," she said prettily. "Rachael does so enjoy dancing.

"And did my lord enjoy himself?" she asked, after a little silence in which she closely regarded that tired and rather taut face, so full of distant

intent, so lacking in that humorous devilry which informed somebody else's.

Chickie made a wry little grimace. "Much better than I shall to-night, I'm afraid; it's a beastly press night; but still," he said, "in a way it's not bad fun fighting against all the various things to get done; if only those beastly presses didn't make such a noise; especially fighting against a fellow like Philips."

"Poor Puss-in-boots," sighed Rachael, who was in a mood to be charitably inclined towards most people. "He seems too second-rate to be taken seriously. And I suppose he's much better than that Haughton person."

"Haughton's negligible," said Chickie, "and at any rate he's not hurting anybody as the other brute is. . . . It's amazing," he went on, "to compare him with all the decent men we know, Frank and Eustace and Vivian——"

There was a little silence while they swayed round a curious corner, and Rachael looked at all the scattered stars, so reserved, so restrained, she thought, and distant from all the noise and trouble of the sleeping monster that engulfed her life; but so cold, she thought, and so palely removed from all the fun and fineness, all the warmth that monster harboured.

## PROBLEM PIE

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"Vivian seemed in very good form, I thought," Chickie said, "didn't he?"

"Yes," said Rachael.

"We ought to ask him up more; I'm afraid I've rather overlooked these things. He's such jolly company."

Rachael closed her tapering hand over her husband's that lay there so firm, so closed—so unresponsive to her coquetry; her fingers slackened.

"As you like," she said.

## CHAPTER X

### AFTER *the* SAVOURY

**I**T had reached that stage when feet only were to be regarded; in the deathly light of that small room—light that seemed to come from nothing so living as a glowing bulb, but rather that seemed dead and embalmed ten thousand years ago and listlessly to be going on—in that unearthly monotone faces loomed up above you, round, pendant, and damnably distinct. Faces that came full of news for which your whole brain was tortured, and that for several hundred years were suspended above you in that listless light hideously unmoved. Then when gazing at them had driven you almost to desperation the silly lips would open and the long rigmarole begin.

Chickie had known for several weeks now that there arrived a point on every press evening at which he dared no longer look at those lunatic *lacunæ* that stuttered and stumbled through maddening mazes of irrelevance, lest he should do something quite futilely insane; he must pull the green shade harder down over his eyes and fix his mind intently on the feet.

"I can't *make* them speak any more quickly," he argued. "I know they do their best, but if I watch their idiotic faces it irritates me; I suddenly seem to lose touch of things. I must hang on," he told himself, "I must hang on, and everything will come all right. Things come in sequence," he feverishly assured himself, "first one and then another and then another and then at last the end, and I can't alter them; if I just let things *go on* it will be all right," and at about four o'clock on every press evening this business of "hanging on" began to make itself felt; by six it was a frenzy; and by eight it had risen to a crashing *crescendo* that every night seemed worse than ever before and quite impossibly formidable, and then at eleven, or just after, Chickie would sink back listless in his chair, every muscle slack, every sense strained, every nerve barbarically alive and tortured; and in the sudden silence of the place he would sit there foolishly watching the disturbing succession of black dots that emerged from one corner of his eye and ran elfishly across the field of vision.

He would sit, in that huddled heap, in terror lest any of the people he heard gathering their coats and hats and things outside should come in to speak to him about anything; when all that cruel compression of activity suddenly stopped,

and the determination that held him to it snapped, contact with some rasping human voice seemed unbearable.

And Chickie would sit in his chair saying with mechanical savageness, "For God's sake, don't come in . . . for God's sake, don't come in . . ." and rocking himself slightly to and fro.

Then finally Adams would poke his head in from the next room and say good-night, and Chickie would brace himself to the awful effort of answering civilly; and off Adams would go swift, upright, decisive, back—Chickie knew—to Mrs. Adams and the two children. Children for whom during the week Chickie pathetically saved his cigarette-cards.

At times Chickie thought a lot about that little family. He tried to picture the small, rather too symmetrical house, Mrs. Adams smiling her cheery, red-faced greeting, and the boys tempestuously proclaiming theirs—so homely, he would think; but so devoid, he reminded himself, of all the charm and elegant grace that awaited him when Rachael should sit opposite him in that quiet, upright way of hers and look curiously at him in silence; and he, desperately searching a brain that had been busily creating all the day for some small sane remark to make, just one possible opening for conversation, would find

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nothing but odds and ends of impossible incoherencies.

That picture in prevision would urge upon his mind the necessity of getting up and going home; a task that loomed ahead as a gigantic expenditure of energy, a frightful thing to ask of senses so far spent. . . .

That was the way that all press evenings went nowadays, and always it started, as did this one, with the Threatening Faces.

So Chickie, knowing the terrible thing to be recommencing, feeling the utter helplessness with which he struggled on the edge of that maelstrom, throwing out pitiful anchors for sanity, felt some comfort even in the sharp shrillness that drew a knife across his nerves; it was a relief, he thought, picking up the receiver, from the deadly monotony of the Thundering Feet.

Said a Voice, "Can I speak to Mr. fyer-Wilson, please?"—a Voice, thought Chickie, so un-harsh, so un-sudden, so restful.

"Speaking," he said.

"Oh, but how abrupt!" cried the Voice; "that does sound frightfully busy."

"I am," he said. "Er—who is that, please?—Oh, really; no, I'm frightfully sorry, I'm afraid I didn't. . . . Of course I remember . . . yes, very good fun, wasn't it? . . . Could I what?"

... I'm afraid I can't; it's a press night, you see, and it's only just beginning. . . . Oh, pretty well, but still it has to be done. . . . No, really, I should love to, you don't know what a release it would be for me to escape from all this for once, but I honestly don't see how I can. . . . What? . . . Well, I'm afraid it's no use if you do . . . sorry . . . good-night. . . ."

Even as Chickie replaced the receiver he had premonitory glimmerings of the futility of such heroics. A possibility had been shown him, an insignificant, tiny thing deep down in the dark recesses of his mind, and he knew that ignore it as he might there it would stay growing, growing, growing into an overwhelming certainty.

He looked a little unsteadily from under his green shade across the disordered room. There was a little mist hovering in one corner—a favourite trick of his eyes nowadays—that seemed like a man's hand on the horizon of things, and down the corridor came Feet towards him, laden with fresh doubts, fresh difficulties, quite gaily hurrying in with all the horror of the unequal struggle.

"This," he thought; "and—and instead of quiet for an evening, peace, somebody to talk to . . . perhaps Adams——" he stared uncomprehendingly into the Face above him that had

come with the Feet and that was impatiently awaiting an answer. "That block of the Manchester riot, sir," said the Face respectfully, but with a note of insistence, "are we to use it or not?"

White, lustreless, pathetic even, Chickie gazed up at his tormentor so inevitable, so easily to be escaped.

"God blast the block," he said with sudden savageness, and, raising his voice, "Adams . . . Adams . . . *Adams* . . ."

Adams came running in from next door, surrounded by a sort of halo of flying papers.

"Hallo," he cried, "what's up?"

"Look here," said Chickie, "oh, look here, Adams. I can't stick this, it's no use, I can't stick this, I can't, honestly . . ." He thumped the desk with a futile fist and a blot of ink shot out on to the virgin foolscap. Chickie surveyed it miserably. "What the hell do I know about the block?" he asked.

"All right, Wilson, all right," Adams said, exchanging glances a little anxiously with the other man. "You're feeling a bit done up, I expect; you haven't looked over-grand for a week or two; just you take a night off—I can easily see her to press to-night. . . ."

"It's damned good of you," Chickie said,

dabbing at the spreading ink and feeling ridiculously like crying, "damned good of you, Adams."

"That's all right; just you run off home and get the wife to tuck you up in bed."

Chickie nodded, smiling a little grimly. "I'll let her know I'm coming," he said.

"Put Mr. Wilson through to his house, Bennett," Adams ordered.

"Skip 773," Chickie interjected as Bennett touched the phone.

Adams and Bennett looked inquiringly.

"Skip double seven three, sir?" queried Bennett.

"God damn it," Chickie cried in exasperation at the man's slowness, "I suppose I can have what number I like."

Things proceeded in the miserable sort of silence that usually follows outbursts of that nature; and in due course Chickie was put through to the unwonted number, wherewith his speech was of the briefest—as best befits a capitulation—and in further due course, a matter of centuries it seemed to Chickie, a large and imposing automobile arrived at the *New Call* offices, its satellites inquiring anxiously for Mr. fyer-Wilson. A well-bred automobile that received Chickie in enclosed warmth, most cunningly lit from concealed sources, most subtly alluring with sub-

duced perfume, that therein enfolded him deep in luxurious rugs and bade him be patient while it sped silently forward like some collected frenzy towards the dark and mysterious stretches of Hammersmith.

From the moment that Adams had forestalled his suggestion and offered to see the paper to press Chickie had known his defeat. All the accumulated devils that he had fought so successfully for over a year had at length been too much for him, and for the half-hour that elapsed between his phoning and the arrival of the car he had stood idly, had almost been brushed idly, on to one side and had watched the thing go inevitably forward without him. People hurrying about looked at him a little curiously, but were too busy to do more. Extraordinary, he reflected, that twenty minutes before he should have had the ordering of their day's work in his hands, and now he was hardly noticed by them. Indeed, if they thought at all of him it was probably only to the effect that "Thank goodness, old Fussypot has gone; perhaps we shall get on with things now"—a not over-generous epitaph on one whose heart had been broken in the fight . . . old Fussypot. . . .

"Don't forget the cheque," Chickie shouted to Adams on his way down to the door, and "Right-o" Adams shouted back without so much

as looking up from his desk, "see you to-morrow."

Chickie lay back in that faintly redolent atmosphere and watched the fairy lights of London growing everywhere like anticipatory, eager stars in the gathering December dusk—lights that he had not seen at that time of day for goodness knew how many months. There flashed across his mind a memory of how once he had played truant from school on such an evening as this, and had stepped suddenly into a world of wonder, unguessed at, thrilling, luminous, and lovely . . . and in spite of the pain behind his eyes the thought made him smile, and from smiling made him laugh—after all, what an adventure it was!—until laughing outright he leant back amid those swallowing cushions, shaken with an irresistible mirth, mirth that grew positively Homeric, that penetrating even the glass division in front of him dimly reached the liveried lumps outside.

"Good job somebody's 'appy," said one of them; "it's perishing cold out 'ere."

"Batty," was the other's pithy summary, "or blind. See the way 'e fumbled getting in?"

But Chickie heard none of this, nor would he have minded one bit if he had; he was conscious only of his miraculous deliverance from slavery—a deliverance, moreover, of such ridiculous ease;

he had merely told Adams to carry on and had walked out. Could anything be easier? Especially as he hadn't actually walked, but had chosen the much more sensible plan of riding in somebody else's car.

That remembrance sobered him for a moment. What on earth was he, of all domesticated, domiciled creatures the most confirmed, doing chivalrously careering over half London? What on earth did one say to damsels in distress, particularly if (as he devoutly hoped) no dragon happened to be there?

Such unwonted frivolity was chilled suddenly by the return of the normal Chickie and of his memory of those tired and troubled eyes, that listless lithesomeness. "Damn it," he thought, "I know how she feels—alone. I've been like that so often, no one—hardly anyone to talk to. . . ."

The scenery outside ceased to run away behind them; the car gave no other indication of its stoppage; and a well-trained servant, somewhat surprised at catching no trace of mirth on the rather tired face before him, ushered Chickie the Cavalier into all the blare of battle . . . Chickie the Cavalier. . . .

And a very nice battleground it was, too, being long and lofty and having that female and most

fiercely friendly of all things—a fire—burning bravely within.

Chickie stood warming himself at the fire, and looking round the room he thought how much Rachael would have liked it—but, of course, he was wrong there, because no woman ever admires another's taste, not even when it coincides with her own; and presently a voice, a pleasing, teasing voice, said at his elbow, "Oh, you busy men . . ." and swinging round he saw Hetty.

Hetty in the same flame-coloured dress that she had worn at the dance, but now with a fur wrap caught up hastily round her shoulders against the cold of that treacherous evening, Hetty rather tragically pale, he thought. . . .

"How very nice of you to come," she said. "I was so lonely."

"You saved me from a frightful evening," he laughed. "I owe a debt to you. . . ."

"Debts," she said curiously; "do you owe debts? What a beastly world it is. It's your press night, I suppose?"

"Was," Chickie said, smiling. "Poor old Adams has got it now."

"I think it's wonderful to be able to write. I'm afraid I've always been rather a brainless creature."

"But it's no more wonderful to write than it is to act," Chickie said seriously.

"Didn't you rather disapprove of my acting?" she asked, sitting down with a graceful sweep.

"Disapprove? We-ell . . . but, after all, why should I?"

"But you did, didn't you?" she teased. "Didn't you honestly think me rather a—a dangerous person?"

Chickie looked down into that upturned fascinating face that but lately had queened it over half London, and was silent for a space. "I have been mistaken about a lot of things," he said, "and now I'm finding it out. I'm afraid life's like that."

"Life's damnable," said Hetty with that sudden achievement of the dramatic of which she was so supremely capable, "unless you have the right people to share it with.

"Chickie," she cried, "don't stand up there being so aloofly masculine. Hetty does so want to smoke and to be comfortable."

Then Chickie searched hurriedly for his manners, which, being a married man, he had forgotten, and still more hurriedly for his matches, which, he having a wife, had been remembered for him; and seating himself down by Hetty he proceeded to administer to her wants, and cer-

tainly she smoked and presumably she was comfortable; but as for Chickie he was not comfortable at all.

Chickie's trouble throughout life was that he never knew when Providence was smiling on him. It seems incredible that any man so seated alone with Hetty, with all the bare-shouldered whiteness and the suggestive desirability of her, with the prospect of a *tête-à-tête* dinner and an undisturbed evening before him could yet be doubtful of Heaven's benevolence; but so it was.

Had it been Vivian now, why, he of course would have thoroughly enjoyed himself by being most politely improper throughout the evening until he heard the husband's returning footsteps, and then being properly impolite by consuming all that deluded man's whisky and leaving in an atmosphere of good favour with everybody. Vivian was one of the very few men who can be on really good terms with their mistress' husband.

Frank would have sat the evening through with his mental notebook open, making himself quite happy with occasional outbursts of experimental passion.

Tallboy would never have been in the predicament; because, as he would have informed you, quizzing you a little distastefully through an un-

necessary monocle, he didn't altogether approve of the Philips, no, not altogether.

But Chickie, being more human than Tallboy, more humble than Frank, and more honest than Vivian, had none of these ways of escape open to him.

"It's ages since you've been to see me," she said. "Whatever have you been doing?"

"It's a week," said Chickie, looking into the fire, "and it was three days before that; I have seen you altogether four times since we met at the dance."

"You precise person," she said, running her hand gently down his arm, gently down, and then gently up again in a continual, sinuous sort of motion that he found extraordinarily soothing. That was as great a familiarity as ever she had allowed herself with Chickie—it showed her wisdom—and it was one which he resented not in the least. He would sit before that roaring fire on the fantastic magenta hassock smoking lazily and as lazily listening to the pleasant woman by his side. No feet to rush towards him with incredible slowness bearing all sorts of impossible predicaments, no faces suddenly to loom out of the mist at him, no green shade to tug down over his eyes whenever the little shooting pain behind them got unusually bad, no intolerable noise—

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simply the shaded, living light of that delightful room, the friendly fire, the certainty of prolonged quiet, the woman's voice. Refuge.

Above all things else it was refuge that was provided for him in that quiet house; and that, he knew, must be the gift of a friend; none other but a very great friend could find a mood so suited to his own, a mental harbour of such safe and settled anchorage.

It had come once to Chickie's mind, to be dismissed instantly as disloyal, that when he was in Half Moon Street and Rachael sat before him straight, serious, superb, he felt indeed as if he were in a sanctuary; but at Hammersmith when Hetty, curled carelessly on a divan, spent an hour or more in saying nothing in her soothing monotone he felt safe. Safe from Adams, safe from the devouring presses, safe from noise, safe even from the mystery and the entangled heart of things.

Hetty, he thought, must get to know Rachael; their complementary characters would each somewhat broaden the other. (The incredible fool. . . .)

"But," she went on, "I am afraid that you must not come and see Hetty any more."

"Why on earth not?" he cried. "Is there anything wrong in it?"

She shrugged fascinating shoulders. "People talk," she said, ". . . perhaps it is unsafe. . . ."

"But—unsafe? Is there any danger in it?"

"I have noticed none," she said, blowing a ring of cigarette-smoke ceilingward, "but it was not because of that, Chickie."

"Why then?" he asked.

"Oh, life's very complicated," she half smiled at him, "and it is unfair to coil others in one's complications when they have so many of their own."

"Life *is* complicated," Chickie assented slowly. "That's hideously true. But I'm beginning to find out, I think, that complications get less involved by sharing them than by keeping them to oneself."

"Sometimes things have gone too far, and then one's troubles are one's own, I suppose."

"I'm very sorry," Chickie said, sensing a rebuke. "I must seem infernally interfering. It was only because I was so grateful for the way you——"

"No, no," cried Hetty with sudden fear that she had underestimated his curiosity, "don't think me nasty, Chickie. I do so desperately want to tell somebody, really."

"If I could help——"

"But you are so busy and troubled as it is."

"Not half so much since I've been coming up here."

Hetty leant forward and lit another cigarette. She propped a tired little face on one pretty hand and gazed tragically into the fire. Chickie sat at her feet. The thing was complete, stage set, foot-lights on, spell-bound audience—very comical (only Chickie failed to realize it).

"It's about business," said Hetty with a pathetic little smile. "I never have understood these things, business—women are such fools, I'm afraid—business and some money. . . ."

It appeared that Hetty, anticipating as large an allowance as usual, had spent rather a lot of money on clothes of one sort or another ("I do so like pretty things," she said) and that Mr. Hetty, anticipating smaller dividends than usual, had not produced the customary allowance, nor had he felt at all inclined to foot the many bills. He had merely laughed and told her to let them wait; but, as she pathetically explained, "They wouldn't wait, Chickie, any longer," and so, of course, she had to pay them. "Somebody lent me the money."

"Oh, Lord," he groaned, "don't say you've been to a money-lender, Hetty."

No, she had not been to a money-lender, not a bit of it; she had displayed much more sense

than that; she had been to a friend. A Friend.

"Good," said Chickie.

By the name, it appeared, of Haughton.

Chickie whistled. "Haughton!" he cried.

"Oh, damn it, Hetty, why Haughton?"

"He was very nice to me," she whimpered, "but I don't like him now, Chickie, oh, not a bit."

"He's a brute," said Chickie. "How much was it?"

Hetty looked pathetically sweet, screwing up her tiny scented handkerchief into a ball. "Eight hundred pounds," she said. "Is that a lot of money?"

"Eight hundred!" Chickie was wonderfully serious in his unwonted *rôle* of father confessor. "But he doesn't want it back all at once—I mean, he isn't pressing for it, is he?"

Hetty nodded miserably. "By Sunday night," she said, "or else he'll tell Lionel."

"He would," said Chickie. "But wouldn't it be better if you told Philips yourself, Hetty?"

She shook her head with a sad little smile. "There are lots of things some husbands don't seem to understand, Chickie," she said. "I simply daren't tell Lionel that Haughton had lent me money; he would think—he wouldn't understand. Besides, he pays me my yearly allowance next week, and so I only want to borrow the money

for four days, . . . some of these people who lend money, I thought . . .”

“That’s fatal,” said Chickie. He lit a cigarette and threw the match angrily into the fire; what beasts men seem inevitably to be, he thought, always insisting on their pound of flesh regardless of the cost to others, husbands insisting on their rights (*The Forsyte Saga* floated into his mind), obliging financial friends insisting on *their* rights . . . rights, rights, rights, rights, productive, it seemed, so often of wrongs . . . he flattered himself that never had he insisted on any rights with Rachael . . . and now this Haughton fellow, one of the scum that seems inseparable from what is best in our civilization—he was here typically involved and intractable . . . “But will you be able to pay this money back in four days?” he asked.

“Positively,” Hetty cried. “That makes it so damnable. Lionel pays me my allowance every year on the 16th of December, and nothing can stop me paying it back.”

“You’re absolutely sure that you’ll be able to?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I should hardly say so if I were not,” she said.

Chickie blushed. “I’m sorry, Hetty,” he said, “it was not that I doubted, but I wanted to be frightfully sure. I can lend you the money.”

Hetty laughed. "It's awfully sweet of you, Chickie," she said, "but of course I couldn't think of it. And, besides, how ever could you afford it?"

"You must let me," he insisted. "It is ridiculous that for just four days you should be subject to all this fuss and worry; and I can easily afford it."

"But eight hundred pounds?"

"Yes, easily—for four days."

Hetty was sceptical, and of course Chickie waxed furious. No man ever set out with great timidity and temerity on a doubtful journey and was warned of its danger but became doubly determined to accomplish it. "I've got the money," he insisted, "and I can do it. It would be criminally foolish of you not to let me."

Useless, of course, to pursue that interview further; when men begin to insist on doing what from the beginning they were designed to do even their best friends can't help them; they become victims so determined, holocausts so insistent, as to be almost self-immolatory. Dissatisfying thoughts about an otherwise fairly rational creature.

Thoughts which in a measure had possessed a

growingly acute observer of men and matters as he stood tentatively in Piccadilly Circus, hesitating, not for shyness (which seldom possessed him) nor for shame (which might visit some when Rachaelward bound), but for a reason much more mundane and concrete, to wit, a large motor-car—an Austin twenty, to be mechanically precise, proceeding in the general direction of Hammersmith with much speed and spluttering—and with Chickie.

"Damn it," thought Frank, "what on earth's Chickie doing here at this time, on a press night, too . . . and in Philips' car? . . ." He crossed the Circus, swinging his cane a little angrily.

This was a situation which threatened to turn into a triangle, and both as a rising dramatist and a somewhat old-fashioned musician Frank found the unvarying note of the triangle distinctly boring.

Posterity, he reflected, reading the novels of our day (and Frank was optimist enough to imagine that they would—he was very young) will imagine that no other set of relations ever existed between human beings than this unsatisfactory triangular one; that no finer or more subtle interaction of character and emotion was known to us; "they will dub us," thought Frank, arrived at the house of Rachael, "the Age Isoscelean," and the thought amused him.

That tea and the subsequent hour or more

spent with Rachael was an unsettling affair.

Owing partly to Dorothy and partly to his finer appreciation of her position Frank had been drawn much more towards Rachael of late; and that lovely lady he now beheld in loyal loneliness.

Loyal loneliness, but proud.

Frank, gazing across that small room at Rachael restful in a gown of green, was overcome by his sense of the dramatic and suddenly spoke his mind. "Oh, Ray," he said, "if I could only put you in a play, what a play it would be!" and dear Rachael, looking back gently to him across that same room which had seen Hugh in supplication, Vivian in sincerity—once—and so many in hope, and which had become a sort of physical counterpart of the very heart of her, said with a little gesture of weariness, "Oh, Frank, I'm tired of plays; although I never go to see any now; but life itself, I think, is getting ridiculously like a melodrama.

"No melodrama," Frank answered, his dramatic instinct now rampant, "dare be half so foolish as life."

"I suppose it amuses Heaven," Rachael reflected, "but won't Mr. St. John Ervine find the next world boring."

Dear Rachael; such half-humorous loyalty was very like her.

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She, the one woman in whom perhaps disloyalty would have been excusable, dishonesty understandable, was meticulously loyal; she who was capable of so much more than any of her men could give her was subject now to a humiliation growing from things so small and sordid that she could not notice them. Subject to it on other people's tongues, but not in fact.

Frank was judge enough of humanity to feel sure that Chickie would not become more than apparently involved with any Mrs. Hetty. "Chickie," he thought, "is not the sort of person who figures in the *News of the World*; for one thing, he wouldn't see the humour of it." But foolishly and inconsiderately he was amusing those whose delight is in the downfall of queens.

And all the while at Half Moon Street, in a despairing loyalty, there were many more excuses for Chickie's idiocy being devised than ever he could have thought of himself. . . .

Frank left. He could not sit opposite Rachael the Subdued one moment longer. Rachael living in semi-tones was pitiable.

"Dear Frank," she said at the door, "thank you so much for such chivalry," and as of old Frank bent low over her outstretched hand.

Furiously he strode away . . . the rights of men, he also thought . . . good God, their *rights*! . . .

Mr. Martindale, our rising young dramatist, was very angry indeed (one always came away from Rachael feeling "very" something), but then neither he nor Rachael knew much of the eyes of men, the tired and distorted eyes, of the empty hollows that burnt behind them and of the queer, jumpy visions that flickered sometimes before them. . . .

People are often disagreeably surprised at suddenly being presented with what they have long been most insistent for; like the Irish, for instance, and Home Rule, and—more closely connected with this narrative—like a rather coarse and sullen man who stood regarding a slip of paper in his hand.

"You've been pretty quick over it," he said at last. "How the devil did you do it, Hetty?"

"A nice man lent me the money," said the woman, shrugging her shoulders. "Do go."

"Lent it you?" Haughton asked, grinning. "That's pretty good." He studied the cheque again; it bore the impressed stamp "*New Call: Account A.*" These words seemed to hold peculiar significance for Haughton.

"Well, that's damned funny," he said slowly; but Hetty, one of those women who know nothing of finance, yawned slightly and lit another cigarette.

CHAPTER XI

A LUNCHEON-PARTY

*Miss Dorothy Westlake expresses
some views*

I THINK it must be an inherited instinct from my mother's side which has always prompted me to keep a diary. Not a journal—nothing so cumbersome and daily as that—but a perpetuation of “the tears and laughter of days past.”

My mother wrote books; that is a secret which I had rather guiltily treasured in those unbookish days. Huge three-decker novels all full of frills and faints and furbelows; the best thing that can be said about which is perhaps that they inspired Kipling's poem.

But as a matter of fact although those old, and dusty books are cumbersome they are not by any means so unrelated to life as most people seem to think. Men and women were just as gentle and generous and beastly and brutal fifty years ago as they are to-day, and most of us will

A LUNCHEON-PARTY

not have at any rate one joy which our parents did, the exquisite thrill of being *fin-de-siècle*-ish.

When I am old and have children I shall rather enjoy watching them turning over my faded pages and wondering what faint foreshadowing of their own zest for life their grey-haired mother had in her day . . . *faint*. . . .

That's just the sort of sentiment Frank hates, I'm afraid; he calls it "Lyceumish," and the only defence one can possibly offer is that life itself *is* Lyceumish, frightfully so—and frightfully good fun; at least I have always found it so.

And I have *found* life much more, I think, than the others; because all I knew of it for the first eighteen years—apart from a short and not very successful schooling—was that great wilderness of a house at Upland Bagshote, where in the prodigal English way we farmed.

And even now, when I am tired of all the concentrated *littlenesses* of London; and when dances and theatres and dinners (all of which I *love*) have momentarily lost their charm I fly back to Upland Bagshote and tramp all the way from the station carrying my bag, and get gloriously muddy and dirty and tired, and I eat a huge and untidy supper, and Mrs. Oakley puts me to bed and kisses me good-night; and I am happy. Then in the morning and for seven, perhaps more, glori-

MOCKBEGGAR

ously untrammelled days there are the texts on the wall to wake up to—unchanged since our time; Mother *must* have been Victorian—and the chipped jug and the cold water to wash in; and outside the great, gawky colts, silly, long-legged things, and the mountainous cart-horses in their friendly-smelling stable, and old William the wagoner touching his cap as usual and going about like deliberation personified; and the great barn is full, and the carts come creaking home over the stubble. I am just a heathen at Upland Bagshote; I invented a special word to describe how I live there; I just “squelch” through life, untidy, muddy, unpunctual, gargantuanly greedy; a heathen, but how happy a one!

And Upland Bagshote was my life until I was over seventeen, my *whole* life. I *was* gawky when I came first to Town, like one of my own dear brown foals; sometimes even now in retrospect I blush to think of things I did, or didn't. Not that I was ignorant, as to my amazement I found several girls of my age were, of the merely biological facts of life—seventeen years on a farm rather precludes *that* kind of gawkishness—but socially I was frightfully young.

And then there came Rachael.

She occurred just like nothing ever before or since; not even Frank was like Rachael (dear

A LUNCHEON-PARTY

Frank, that isn't unfair a bit, really). I met Rachael and I knew at once that she was quite the most wonderful person I had ever seen.

I used to cry myself to sleep every night long after I first met her, thinking that somebody else was talking to her, loving her, perhaps even being kissed by her while I lay alone and miserable in my aunt's horrid house at Highbury. Oh, no man could have been one-tenth part as jealous for Rachael's love as was I.

And then, miraculously it seemed to me, she suddenly became aware of me and had me to stay with her in Half Moon Street. I, to stay in Half Moon Street, with Rachael! Even now I can recapture some of the thrill that possessed me in anticipation of it.

Once with Rachael and under her wing, as it were (though she never made one feel a bit like that), life suddenly became immensely enlarged. One met heaps and heaps of interesting people, and merely to be a friend of Rachael's—and in whatsoever company we were she always made it clear that I *was* her friend—was to be at once a much sought-after and requested person. A reflected glory, I know, but from how luminous a source!

Rachael knew everybody and went everywhere, and took an interest in all things. she painted, she

danced, she acted, she rode, she sang—exquisitely she sang—she wrote, she drove a car; and her people were quite the most objectionable you ever did see in all your life. Even I couldn't stomach them quite, with all my blind devotion to Rachael and my fairly extensive acquaintance of uncouth people in Hampshire, where uncouthness seems to flourish rather more than in most parts, I think.

But to no person in the world was Rachael more loyal than to her father, and she would quite bravely continue to ask people to dinner although she knew quite well that her father would wear a made-up tie, have horrible nails, and probably eat off his knife (that isn't a conventional gibe at all; it's fact), and people quite cheerfully continued to come in spite of such things.

You see, Rachael was worth it.

To sit opposite her at dinner, to hear her laugh, see her smile, to win her approval—for the elegant young men about town that was worth all those incidental horrors. Could a girl be more greatly complimented? . . .

Well, since that time I have grown a good deal older; much more in experience than in years, perhaps, but even now, with the consciousness that superlatives are seldom deserved and generalizations made to be disproved, I do quite deliberately and soberly say that if our civilization

A LUNCHEON-PARTY

in the very fullness of its flower and the very centre of its wealth, in London in 1914, had produced nothing more than the queenly, elegant, superb, and subtle beauty that was Rachael, then our civilization has not been in vain. If God has made all the rest of us blind, and misshapen, and ugly, and brutal, that informed and quickened rarity is His justification.

Those are, I suppose, ridiculous things to say; but love, thank goodness, still drives us to ridiculous things. Christ, one imagines, was the most prodigal spendthrift the world has ever seen. . . .

That was Rachael; and unlike most revelations and visions she was not a bit trying to live with. She was intensely human, and one met all sorts of queer and interesting people through her. Curiously enough, two people who at one time entered nearly into my life I did not meet through Rachael; though my knowledge of both was deepened later by her—Vivian Dalmeny and another one. The other was the man Philips; he was much more beastly than Vivian and had none of Vivian's redeeming features. Everybody meets horrid things in life, and it is no good dwelling on them.

Upland Bagshote was a kind but careless place. No accounts were kept, and no one was sent away empty. One recalls Chesterton's line,

MOCKBEGGAR



*And Eldred's great and foolish heart stood open
like his door.*

A typically prodigal English farm; but a prodigality of which we could be proud—a fine foolishness which seems the destined English mark through things; and in his old age when he could walk hardly farther than the Far Ox Leasow Upland Bagshote failed my father. English farming was dying one of its recurrent deaths, and his fortune died with it; then it was that he conceived the idea that I should marry Philips, and it was mainly with that object in view, I think, I was first sent to Town.

I conceived the idea—on seeing Mr. Philips—that I would not. One cannot argue with the choice of the soul, and I would sooner have been a toad at the bottom of a good Hampshire ditch than go yoked to that impossibility.

Rachael helped me in that difficulty—as in all others—by sending me to Hugh. She said, “My dear, no woman can ever realize just how hideously bestial men can be, so you had better go and see a man about this—the best of men,” she said softly. So I went to Hugh; and though he was nice he was useless and worse than useless, because he referred me to Vivian. (Later the War and the consequent revivification of Upland Bagshote saved me from Mr. Philips.) And just

A LUNCHEON-PARTY

then I was very bitter about Vivian and even a bit about Rachael; because I had met Vivian Dalmeny first, and to me, a rather breathless, hero-seeing simpleton from the country, he was wonderful; even now one sees the attraction—oh, he has an air, has our Vivian. A very taking, swash-buckling sort of villain. To him, a somewhat bored and *blasé* man in Town, I was a refreshingly ignorant amusement. I am still fool enough to think that in his offhand way he even liked me a little, and certainly for the most part he was very nice to me; but, you see, just then my heart happened to be at his feet, and in his polished, unruffled manner he walked on without noticing it.

I once heard Vivian say to Frank—indeed, he said it openly in my presence—that he was busy studying psychology.

“Studying psychology?” asked Frank incredulously.

“Yes,” said Vivian, “I am taking a practical experimental course in feminine psychology; and very interesting, too.” And then he laughed that gentle, unobtrusive laugh that is so blind and brutal.

So that when it came to my turn to be an experiment in Vivian’s course I think that he was rather surprised. But he only laughed, and I cried miserably for nights after; that seems to be the way.

MOCKBEGGAR

That, I thought, would be the end of Vivian Dalmeny; but hideously it was not, for when Rachael took me for a motoring tour in Sussex we saw nothing but glorious country and smudges of delightful villages until suddenly she pulled up behind two backs and vigorously addressed them. No; *one* dusty back—Chickie's; Vivian's wasn't.

And they boarded us, of course, he sitting in front with Ray, and Chickie and myself behind. Never has Vivian looked nicer, and never have I hated him more.

That was the beginning of it; I knew it as I sat with Chickie after dinner listening to all his talk about those damned stars; Rachael, who had flown so high over all, was attracted by Vivian.

It was the greatest compliment the man has ever had paid to him; and I, who could so thoroughly have disillusioned her about him, out of a foolish chivalry would not. For I have always thought that idols and their worship are the only things that make life worth while—that is why I grew to like Chickie so (but how I hated him that night in Mayfield!), because he will put people on pedestals.

But, of course, everybody got put on pedestals during the War, and one couldn't very well go on hating a man who spent most of his time sitting in six inches of mud and saying such funny

A LUNCHEON-PARTY

things about it as did Vivian; and this much I must say for him, that when Hugh was killed he was the only person who seemed in any way capable of distracting Rachael.

Ray never told me so, but I think that she must have got much nearer to Hugh just before he died than any of us guessed; but never for one instant did she show any visible signs of grief at all about him; she just went on being Rachael and, as Vivian said every time he came on leave, being the only just and sufficient cause for desertion that he knew; but there were ghosts behind her eyes.

Poor Rachael; she walked a little, I think, in hell.

And the only person she found pleasure in at all was Vivian, who so completely scorned life and so completely enjoyed it. Vivian falsified the books of life and invited Ray to share his good time in squandering the proceeds; and, upon my soul, sometimes one is tempted to think that it would be worth while.

It was in 1918 at the Tallboys' ball, I think, that Rachael went nearest the brink with Vivian—if indeed it be a brink; anyway they spent a very considerable portion of that evening lost in one of Stephané's inimitable "corners," though I was too selfish to let it worry me much then, because

MOCKBEGGAR

I was wearing my yellow frock for the first time, and Frank was very charming to me.

I had always thought before that Frank was rather stupidly conceited—classed him as a modern young man who had quite completely achieved the superficial and become merely a “being” without any “human” attached to it; but when we danced a little and spoke more (our moods seemed very well attuned that night) he was amazingly interesting, with much more humour in him than had any of the others.

It was then I discovered for the first time that he “studied people”—it gave me horrible cold shivers down my spiritual spine!

I think it was his monocle (which I have persuaded him to abandon) which had misled me about him.

Then must Ray come home one night and while brushing that divine hair of hers (how I wish mine were like it, though Frank alleges, loyally, that it *is*) announce in a matter-of-fact sort of way that she is engaged to Chickie! Announced it in a manner as matter-of-fact as you please, and then burst into a storm of terrible tears; the only time that I have known Rachael to cry, and I have since seen her under a worse stress. Poor Ray, it was very terrible for me to see my goddess fail like that.

A LUNCHEON-PARTY

Her marriage with Chickie was a leap for safety, I think—the hurried leap of a frightened thing in the dark. A plunge into placidness, but placidness is so liable to become a prison. . . .

Rachael in a sudden fervour of self-immolation was not good company, and Town suddenly got rather dull; so I fled down to the Grenfells at Coln St. Aldwyn.

Coln St. Aldwyn!—a place quite comparable to Upland Bagshote, with all that friendliness that comes from old and comfortable and careless things; and such a jolly lot of people, never such apple-pie beds, never such *frightful* pillow-fights, never brogues and stockings so gloriously muddy (I spent a lot of my time in an old pair of breeches!), and suddenly, by the bridge, collected, thoughtful, observant—Frank!

How surprised I was! And how not surprised!—because I found that he had been so much in my mind and seemed so naturally to step into my life.

Frank was just a shade too strait—no, a shade too *unloosened* to fit in entirely with the Lodge and all its jolly heathens—Frank with his Meadow Cottage, prim and tidy, his oak and old silver and his dear, adorably serious ways. It is rather disconcerting, perhaps, being wooed in a quite heartlessly inquisitive house like that, but one

didn't mind it much if one was so completely lost as I was—and am, and, please God, ever shall be.

After that first meeting in the muddy lane where Frank showed to such advantage—I'm sure I couldn't have looked half as well groomed as he did—I went back to the Lodge with very much enlarged views about him.

And in bed that night—most of my useful thoughts come in bed or on a walk—I became convinced that Frank and I were, of all our set, the most—the only—level-headed people. Mrs. Macready says that that is a thought which visits most young people, but that they all get over it sooner or later; but seriously in this case I really do think it is so. Consider what Frank, in a dramatic way, calls the caste: Rachael, quite, oh, quite unapproached, and for that very reason not altogether of “the common day”—not cast in common clay; Rachael moves in fairy worlds of feeling alien to our rough-and-tumble world; I think that all men realize that and a little restrain their inherent bestiality in her presence in consequence. Rachael is a convincing reason for that fine folly—chivalry. . . . The world will turn willingly for Rachael's sweet amusement, but she cannot help in the turning.

Then Vivian. Oh, there isn't much about this old world our Vivian doesn't know—from one

A LUNCHEON-PARTY

aspect. "God is self-love," laughs Vivian, and he quite candidly means it and quite honestly lives up to it. Vivian can be very charming and very cruel—even now, knowing him as I do, if he set himself out to be nice to me and paid me compliments with his Vivianesque smile I hardly dare trust myself with him. He laughs overmuch *at* life and not a bit *with* it.

Stephané has all the inherited traits Dalmenyish, but not *quite* enough charm to carry them off. Such insolence as Vivian's must be well worn if at all.

Tallboy would be more useful in any practical dilemma than most of them, but even he suffers terribly—as does Chickie—from the profound disadvantage of being unable to laugh at himself.

Now Frank and I, in our plebeian way, can, and sometimes do, lean back a little from life, and looking on the curious, congested, inconclusive affair that it is and on the mercenary, meaningless, and magnificent creatures that we are, laugh very loud and long at all our superb and stupid ways.

Not the laughter of Miss Rose Macaulay—to instance a modern—which proclaims a blankness, a moral bankruptcy; but that rather of Mr. Chesterton, which salutes a divine idiocy, the cap and bells of *Le Jongleur de Dieu*. And that laughter, I do sincerely and solemnly believe, and so believ-

ing hope, will carry us to the very courts of Heaven.

And so I said to Frank that, being to our little world in the nature of what woodman and wagoner, publican and peasant, and all common people are to Europe—moral ballast—we could do nothing but wait a little, holding happy hands, until Rachael in her divinity and Chickie in his solemnity were more harmoniously attuned.

Because then I feared Vivian. I have never said that much before to anyone, not even to Frank; we have simply looked at one another and thought it; but I feared him. Terribly I feared him.

When Rachael became engaged no man was more surprised and none more apparently unconcerned than Vivian.

Apparently.

I trust I know my Vivian a little better than that—and now of all the damnable tricks that life will play the danger is not from Vivian at all! I cannot doubt, knowing his more passionate moments as I do and the strength of his love, if it be love, for Rachael—I cannot doubt that the assault has been made and perhaps repeatedly made, but that the white citadel of her soul has valiantly withstood it.

Since her marriage a curious sort of sanctity of

A LUNCHEON-PARTY

domesticity has descended upon Rachael; she seems happy to retire into a nunnery of her own chaste thoughts and there most quietly and calmly to dwell.

I say that life is damnable in this matter, and it is; for now in the middle of this year of grace 1922 there walks in London the one woman incomparable, the woman who could make a king of any man, rather sadly, rather silently, behind doors and shutters lest she might catch any echo of the whispers she is too proud to notice—the dirty whispers that are hinted over teacups and enlarged over cigars. “What about Wilson and——” Ugh, I cannot think how people foul their lips so.

Surely this is damnable.

And Rachael is so much more than loyal to Chickie; not by a hint, not by a suggestion even of a gesture would she dream of questioning him or his movements. fyer-Wilson married a very great pride when he married Rachael.

And who knows? Not I, nor Frank, discuss it as we may; I think that Chickie is only a fool, but folly so quickly becomes criminal. So what will come of it, as that beastly little Pepys man says, God knows. (Have you noticed how all men admire Pepys and are amused by him; what a confession of common bestiality!)

There are, however, not wanting indications that others besides the Deity will know soon. At least according to Frank, who at the breakfast table the other day suddenly handed the paper over to me with a snort. "Isn't that typically Combinish?" he asked (it was, of course, a Combine paper; which indeed is not?). I read the indicated paragraph, which excelled in the one and only thing in which the modern paper does excel—an amazing talent for *suppressio veri*, only equalled by its wonderful capabilities of *suggestio falsi*.

"But surely," I said, "Stetson has always hated the *New Call*; I mean, this is only what one might expect, isn't it?"

"I suppose so; but fancy daring to suggest that there is anything fishy about the accounts; isn't it damnable?"

Men always swear at breakfast; it is part of man's lordly privilege to get up in a bad temper. So Frank went unrebuked; besides, it *was* damnable; and idiotic, too, when one considers Chickie's conscientious carefulness.

I lunched that day with Rachael.

It is curious how in one's life certain days seem to gather growing trends and tendencies to them so that, unconsciously almost, one dates events and circumstances by them; such for instance was the

A LUNCHEON-PARTY

Tallboys' ball; and such also, for all its undramatic promise, was to be to-day.

We lunched at Les Gobelins, and a very good lunch, too.

Rachael looked lovely; she had on a Zyrot hat and a Beggar's Opera-ish sort of dress with that slight crinoline effect over the hips that so well becomes her. Moreover, she was in very good form, much better than I had seen her in for a long time.

She spoke very quickly in a jumpy, elliptical sort of way which was fashionable just then, following on Mr. A. S. M. Hutchinson's discovery that, by omitting all the verbs from a sentence, and inverting the rest of it, it was possible to make a fortune.

She sat there smoking a small cigarette in her celebrated green amber cigarette-holder and smiling rather amusedly, rather wickedly, through the smoke—very much the old Rachael.

We were discussing Stetson's innuendoes.

"There is," she said thoughtfully, "a French proverb or saying which quite exactly meets the case, and I would immediately quote it at you, but I have forgotten it. But who cares what they say? And, after all, they don't say, they merely insinuate. They are only professional insinulators.

“Professional insinulators,” she cried: “but that is a new trade and I must tell Mr. Chesterton about it; it will do for his club.”

“And how silly,” she said, “to suggest that Chickie could make a mistake about money; he is the most scrupulous old silly alive and quite painfully honest, much more so than am I—my dear, do *look* at that extraordinary thing that has just come in.”

I looked. It *was* extraordinary—a shapeless mass of fur that looked like a peripatetic Alp was busy engulfing most of two chairs; it wheezed, it gasped, it grunted, it glared furiously at the waiter, who quite obviously disliked it.

“It perspires,” said Rachael, “oh, it does visibly. How horrible!”

“That,” she said in fascinated contemplation, “is what the War has done to Regent Street; it is the triumph of democracy; and I suppose that is Mrs. Democracy; let us flee from it.”

And together we fled, Rachael picking her way between the tables with that inimitable swinging grace of hers, her red shoes a mighty magnet to all the busy eyes present. Rachael was the first woman to wear red shoes in London and the first, of course, to discard them; she was always much too smart to be in the fashion.

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"And how," Rachael asked, "does married life suit you?"

You see, Frank and I had got married in spite of my determination to wait. After all, there is a very great deal of animalism in us all, thank goodness, and in the whole business of marriage; and there comes a time when people who want one another as badly as did Frank and I had much better achieve their desires whatever the considerations are against it; Frank and I were level-headed enough to know that; it is partly my country upbringing, I suppose, that makes me realize how thoroughly sane healthy mating tends to keep one.

"Husbands," she went on without waiting for an answer, "are very curious things. If you get one who is full of *savoir-faire* and very much your man of the world, why, that savours rather of second-hand goods; but if you have one who is extremely unsophisticated, why, that's rather a nuisance. Adult education always is such a lengthy business; but still I am inclined to think that its dangers are exaggerated," and with her suddenly illuminating smile she was gone.

That was Rachael's way of saying that she trusted Chickie and that she didn't give a damn for what anybody said about him, and it had the curious effect on me of making me violently wish

to run round to Chickie's office, to pull him out and give him a thoroughly good slapping and tell him not to be a fool. But then that has come to be my normal attitude towards the lordly sex; it must be for all sane women, I think.

I have become convinced that if a man's coffee is hot in the morning and his slippers in the right place at night he is assured of the salvation of his wife's soul and of the sanctity of the marriage-tie (except perhaps in Frank's case; he is rather an unusual male—I should not have married him otherwise).

However, Rachael seemed satisfied that the particular specimen of the species whom she had deified would not make quite an unutterable ass of himself, and as women, especially married ones, invariably know a good deal more about a man's future movements than he does himself I felt all the happier for it.

The whole art of husband-managing was one very concisely expressed by Rachael. "You have only," she said, "to realize what act of folly your lord and master is next about to commit, to make all preparations suitably to counteract its effects, and then to utter cries of wondering astonishment when it is achieved."

But then, of course, men probably think differently. . . .



Frank on his return that evening was very much the male morose. . . .

"How did the rehearsal go?" I asked. "Did Ganaway die convincingly?"

"I hope so," Frank scowled (he's just like a sulky schoolboy sometimes), "but I didn't stay until the end."

"But why on earth not?" I cried.

"I went to see Chickie. Damn it, Doro," he cried, "that fellow is the most blithering idiot alive. He might be a woman without any knowledge of business . . . the mess he's made of things. . . ."

I swallowed that, because I wanted to hear the story; it seemed to me that if Chickie's idiocies were coming to light we might reasonably expect an end to all this silly nonsense with the Philips person. . . .

Frank went on. He had been rung up by Chickie, it appeared, and had gone to his office in response to an urgent message. "Never seen such a place," said Frank; "tucked away in a tiny little court off Fleet Street, you'd think it was a resting-place for tired mummies from the look of the outside; and when you got in it was like a hive, everybody rushing about in their shirt-sleeves and taking no notice of me at all—it was just like the "behind" of one of my plays ten

minutes before the curtain goes up. I fastened on to a fellow at last, and he took me up to Chickie's place, a tiny little room, with a queer, dead sort of brilliance in it, and Chickie stuck there at a desk in *his* shirt-sleeves with a great green shade over his eyes, cussing some poor devil horribly. My word, he did look bad, Doro. The silly fellow has absolutely tuckered himself up. And when we were alone he leant back in his chair (upon my soul, I thought the fellow was going to cry) and he simply said, 'Frank, I'm in a hell of a mess,' and, devil take it he is. . . ."

(Here, thought I, we shall get the gist of the matter; men love long dramatic introductions like that. . . .)

"What's he done?" I asked.

"It's this Mrs. Hetty. . . ."

"The Philips woman? He hasn't made a completely unutterable ass of himself over her, has he?"

"He has," Frank said, "but not in that direction; I don't think that's in Chickie; it's even worse than that" (sound male judgment there!), "it's money."

"Money? . . . And that's worse?"

"Um. About six months ago, I think it was in December actually, Hetty was jolly hard pressed to pay her bills; apparently she owed a lot. . . ."

## A LUNCHEON-PARTY

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"She would," I interjected. "Look at her clothes."

"Well, she always does look very smart, certainly, but anyway she had borrowed some money off somebody to pay these beastly things, and she was pressed for immediate repayment. . . ."

"Who lent it her?"

"Chickie won't say. I suppose she went to a money-lender; women always do. . . ."

"Go on."

"Her annual allowance was due in less than a week, and then, of course, she would be able to pay back anything she might borrow. . . . Chickie offered to lend it. . . ."

"How much?"

"Eight hundred, to start with, and as much again, I gathered. God knows how much since. . . ."

"But I never knew Chickie had so much money to spare. I thought they were quite fashionably hard up."

Frank gave a derisive laugh; it is part of the appalling egotism of men that they can give that sort of laugh when their own selfish reticence is responsible for the remark which provokes it.

"He hasn't," he said, "and he hadn't." There was a silence; I wasn't going to appear surprised.

"Chickie lent her that money out of the *New Call* account, which is subsidized by that fellow Wild; because, as he says, he knew he could pay it all back in a day or two . . . he *knew*. . . ."

"What sort of a man is Mr. Wild?"

"Looks as though his address ought to be Regent's Park—an elephantine sort of man; but what on earth has that to do with anything?"

"And he hasn't paid it back?"

"He hasn't been able to; he's never had the money from Mrs. Hetty; she's worse off now than she was six months ago——"

There was silence again. There didn't seem to be much one could say to that.

"And it's come to a head now," Frank went on, "because of these damnable hints in the *Combine* papers about the *New Call* accounts."

"Does Mr. Wild know about it?"

"Some miserable cur sent him an anonymous letter saying that he had better look into the *New Call* accounts, and he turned up at the office about it this morning. That's why Chickie phoned me. Apparently Wild has been stumping up about a thousand a month quite cheerfully without ever inquiring as to how it was being spent; naturally he relied entirely on Chickie. And when he turned up there Chickie, like the honest fool he is, wouldn't try to hide the thing at all, wouldn't

even try to smooth it down a bit, simply blurted out that he had borrowed about three thousand pounds and hoped to be able to pay it back, wouldn't even say what it had gone for. . . . Wild was furious, naturally; couldn't sack Chickie, because he had already resigned a minute previously, and stumped out to his solicitors. . . . It's damnable," Frank said with all the senseless sex-loyalty of a male. "Oh, I know that Chickie's been an awful idiot; it's idiocy unparalleled, but it isn't dishonesty. I swear Chickie couldn't do a dishonest thing; he never had the slightest intention of stealing the money; he simply wanted to borrow it, and that beastly woman let him down. . . ."

"Oh, naturally it was the woman's fault," I said, "but why didn't fyer-Wilson pay it back out of his income?"

"He doesn't get enough; besides, as Chickie said, you couldn't expect Rachael not to dress as well as ever or to suffer in any way for another woman—oh, he's been tremendously loyal to Rachael all through this, has Chickie. . . ."

"But if Rachael knew . . ."

"If Rachael knew," said Frank slowly, "Chickie would . . . well, God knows what he would do . . . and how are we to prevent her from knowing?"

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"How are we to let her know!" I cried. "Only by Rachael knowing at once can anything like sanity be hoped for in all this mess. Men always think that by glossing over their idiocies they can in some way better them. We must go at once to see Rachael."

"We might phone," Frank suggested.

"No, no, we must go to her and explain; things always sound worse over the phone. . . ."

So, of course, we went; Frank unconvinced, a little surly, a little frightened, I think; I furious. Fools, fools, fools, I kept thinking; first ever to initiate such a hopeless state of affairs; the incompetence of the average male over money matters really is amazing; if houses were run by husbands what a host of clubs there would be; and secondly more than fools for even dreaming of hiding the thing from Rachael . . . from Rachael, who above all others would be so gloriously capable of seeing the weakness that was almost excuse enough for the folly, who above all could so wonderfully swallow up in love a lapse like that; that it should all be shuffled away in corners and lied about to her as though she were some servant or underling—that would indeed have been grievous hurt to her . . . oh, the meanness of it . . . the folly . . . Such folly it was, just like that of a culprit schoolboy, that as we

A LUNCHEON-PARTY

neared Half Moon Street I began to take heart again; Rachael would not deal too harshly with such wayward children, I thought; the manner of the thing, its conception, were too trivial to disturb at all the greatness with which she went through life; perhaps, I thought, these puerile men will be a little enlightened as to what manner of woman Rachael is when she laughs her silver laugh at all their frightful confessions . . . perhaps Chickie . . . and then at the door the damnable suavity of Otter, the incomparable Otter. No, Mrs. fyer-Wilson was not at home, she had gone out quite suddenly after dinner. In a moment my foolish optimism lay shattered all round me.

That Rachael should have broken her now usual domesticity on this one of all nights—perhaps it signified nothing, but—I caught quite desperately at Otter. “But where, where, where has she gone to?” I cried, shaking him. Otter, the pompous doll, was unmoved; he was afraid he could not say . . . *afraid* . . . men are like that, afraid, always afraid . . . cowards. . . .

CHAPTER XII

AMBULATORY PREPARATION *for* LUNCHEON

1922 was not turning out quite such an exciting year as it had promised to be. For one thing the expected revolution failed to materialize, and that, of course, was a great disappointment. Nobody quite seems to know why the English revolution is so long coming; some people say, of course, that it has come and that we haven't noticed it; anyway, the Prince of Wales still seems very popular and still smokes very large cigars, and Beckett goes on being knocked out in the first round, and the record transfer-fee is still paid weekly, and the New Poor still seem to have enough to live on, and altogether life is very pleasant for people with sufficient money—perhaps it always will be for them, revolution or not.

So that if you owned a flat in St. Jermyn Street and had just finished an excellent dinner and sat there enjoying a good cigar you might reasonably be expected to feel fairly well content with life, even if Income Tax was at five shillings in the pound.

PREPARATION for LUNCHEON

And, of course, Vivian was very well content with life; for one thing money, that useful lie that intrigues so many, bothered him not at all; people certainly seemed to be taking more off him than ever before, but there was still plenty left, so he resolutely refused to worry.

There is a class of people who are superbly indifferent as to how their livelihood is gained; that is why land-agents and their tribes are such staunch Conservatives; why, indeed, kill the goose that thoughtlessly lays so many golden eggs? Why, indeed, wake it? Merely abstract its eggs and let it slumber undisturbed.

However, the abstraction of his golden rent-eggs seemed very unlikely to disturb Vivian—I suppose his maternal instincts were not sufficiently developed; and he sat on there, stretched male-wise in the act digestive, very nearly as well pleased with all the pleasant things and people in his life as he had ever been.

“Very nearly” is a phrase which so well seems to describe our present condition. We very nearly won the War; the big coal strike of 1921 was very nearly successful; butter and bread and all those funny elementary things which scientists seem unable to do without are very nearly as good as they were; and altogether things are very nearly normal; very nearly.

So with Vivian; he was very nearly as content with life as he had ever been.

There was none of this foolishness about falling in love, with Vivian. Love is a strong, masterful restless sort of thing, it wrecks a man's digestion, and plays the devil with his golf, and generally is very compelling and insistent. The only person a man may safely love with consistency is himself; Vivian knew that very well, and in all the girls whom he knew and liked, save one, Vivian was interested not by the girl herself, but by her estimation of him.

Every new acquaintance was for a short time a mirror in which stood reflected Mr. Vivian Dalmeny, and a very nice reflection, too. Whenever Vivian thus met Mr. Dalmeny in the admiring eyes, in the little laugh of pleasure, in the simulated shockedness of some pretty mirror, he was very well pleased with him; in fact, the more he saw of Mr. Dalmeny the more he liked him. After all, as he argued, one has to live with oneself for the whole of one's life, so one might as well be on good terms with oneself; which, as Frank told him at the time, sounds more like a sum than a sentence, and probably means nothing.

If the mirror has a heart, well, that, of course, is awkward for the mirror; with all his girls, save

PREPARATION for LUNCHEON

one, the heart of Vivian was an organ purely anatomical—save one.

Oh, save One; Vivian could never forget the queenliness which once he thought had been his. With her he might have achieved his fine ideal of living life with a gesture, with others he could live it only with gusto; and gusto so often tends to be disgusting.

Vivian had three cardinal principles in life, and Rachael had caused him to transgress them all (they were, of course, all subject to the super-cardinal one of having no principles at all). He could now no longer say that he never asked for anything twice, being accustomed either to obtain what he wanted at his first request or to do without. Not that he never envied anybody anything. Nor that he never allowed the thought of anybody else to cause him one moment's discomfort; because when in the intervals between his practical experiments in feminine psychology Vivian would dwell in amused regret for the last and in pleasurable anticipation of the next there would sometimes creep into his mind, tacked on to the conviction that he was enjoying himself at any rate, the disquieting suggestion that it was only at second-rate.

The big, the embracing, the overwhelming thing had gone. Oh, those days before such deter-

mined idiocy, which is the hallmark of to-day, has settled on the world; those early days with the virginal Rachael, so fresh, so white, so Du-Barry-ish.

With Rachael in the little toy garden at Mayfield under the stars . . . Rachael's *petite* hands, that so delicately had held life, so curiously had inquired into it, her silvery voice that so amusingly had commented on it. Hands and voice, that once had touched him, had so wittily provoked him . . . and then, of course, into the middle of a not unromantic reverie like that some mundane occurrence would protrude itself—his cigar must go out, or his man must walk in and announce a Visitor, and close upon the heraldic heels, denying Vivian any chance of protesting his seclusion, the Visitor.

And such a Visitor that Vivian in amazement caught his breath.

Rachael.

For a very long time indeed in certain minds and moods will Vivian be able to catch that fine illusion, out of the insecure mixing of shadow and substance to persuade himself of that rare image which suddenly that evening was on his mind indelibly impressed. Rachael, soft, alluring, clutching at the huge whiteness of fur thrown over her bare shoulders; and the black brightness of her

PREPARATION *for* LUNCHEON

eyes that looked like windows into Paradise. . . .

There sprang to Vivian's mind the one word which he had long been wanting, "incomparable"—Rachael the matchless, the Incomparable. . . .

"Rachael!" he cried, fearing to cherish the wild hopes that sprang up in him.

Rachael smiled an enigmatic sort of smile, and she walked, with that dear swagger, into the room and sat down very close to the fire.

"Please, Vivian," she said, "I should like some coffee. Very hot, please," because she was a very practical, sensible girl and knew that never was any crisis ever in any way bettered by missing one's meals.

And so, of course, coffee was produced.

Rachael sipped it, and it was very hot, and she was well pleased.

"You are really a very nice bachelor, Vivian," she said "(by the way, I suppose you still are a bachelor—one never knows with you), and I do think that you make a very good host. Coffee is so often lukewarm, and that is positively horrible; it is like liquid Wesleyan Methodism. And one should smoke," she said, "not with coffee, but immediately afterwards."

It occurred to Vivian that he was as good at that game as was anybody, so he remarked solemnly:

"Quite; but not a cigar; first a cigarette immediately after coffee and then a cigar—that is what I always offer my guests."

"The perfect host," she murmured. "But where do you gain all this domesticity, Vivian? You must have been reading 'Home Notes' in the *Daily Mail*——"

"I don't read news-sheets——"

"Why, no, I had forgotten it; one gets unaccustomed to fastidiousness in these days."

"Papers," she said, looking carefully into her cup, "are the very devil. Oh, Vivian, the very, very devil. But then, of course, as you are so superior to them you will know nothing about it. . . ."

"I had heard . . . one or two things. . . ."

"About—about the *New Call*?" She glanced up quickly.

He nodded.

"And you believe them?"

Vivian shrugged his shoulders. Eloquent answer that meant so much more than "I don't know," the much more cruel "I don't care."

Vivian did not go down to a little alley off Fleet Street to work in a depressing newspaper office all day, and he could not be bothered with the curious consequences which overtook people who were foolish enough to do so.

PREPARATION for LUNCHEON

It had been the knowledge, the intuition, that such would be his attitude towards the thing that had forced Rachael suddenly to fly to Vivian, who for so long had been nothing in her life but a banished allurements.

Vivian steadfastly refused to have anything to do with ways of life and conduct inferior to his own. "Do people do these things?" his eloquently shrugged shoulders said. "How curious!" Oh, he will die a really good aristocratic death, will Dalmeny, when tumbrils roll round Hyde Park Corner.

"But isn't it frightful?" Rachael went on after a little silence in which so much was said. "It's the ordinariness of it that I so hate."

"It's not the dishonour," she cried, "because I don't think for one moment that Chickie has done that; and I shouldn't mind so much in a way if he had, because that might be done magnificently; there might be some reason for that; I can imagine myself being sufficient reason for it to any other man; even had I married you, Vivian, I should probably have not made you faithful, but at least I should have made you fine. It's the littleness of it," she cried; "I have not even been able to prevent him from being a fool—that's what hurts."

"He has not walked with me at all in life," she said.

“Money!” she cried with as harsh a laugh as ever he had heard her give. “How foolish of men to be so idiotic over money. Chickie makes me an idol, he worships me, he comes to me for beauty; and when he wants money, which I would give him without so much as questioning what its uses were to be, he must needs go elsewhere. Vivian, he never came to me once, never said a word about being in difficulties, never cried, ‘Rachael, I am fighting with life—Rachael, help me’; no, I must hear whispers and catch glances and read innuendoes; oh, Vivian, why was that?”

“Why has Life treated me so badly,” she cried, “who was so fain of it?”

“Life has treated us all badly,” Vivian answered gloomily, “since you got married, Rachael.”

“But I was happy——”

“Oh, happy, yes,” said Vivian, who had a curious theological bent in his character. “So shall we all be in Paradise—but we shan’t enjoy it. But don’t you worry about this rotten affair. I always did think that Chickie was just a shade too sane to be sensible. I expect his corns have been hurting him or it’s his liver or something. Modern cooking is responsible for half the modern divorce court, I think. Frank will find a way out, and I will administer paternal advice. And

PREPARATION for LUNCHEON

then, I suppose," he went on twice as gloomily, "you will lapse back again into domestic bliss," and he looked so lugubrious that involuntarily they both laughed, and with her laughter came tears into Rachael's eyes, that glistened there like stars in frosty pools reflected.

"Oh, Rachael, Rachael," cried Vivian, suddenly on his knees by her side and covering that pale face with devouring kisses, "this is damnable—I could have given you so much . . . Ray. . . ."

"Dear . . . don't," she could say only. "Dear Vivian . . . *don't*."

There came a merciful release from that. . . .

Telegrams and telephone-bells call imperatively in moments even of our wildest passion, and bitterly though he might curse it Vivian moved towards his clamorous instrument.

Rachael sat motionless in the chair, exhausted quite by the whirlwind which confused her . . . unquestionably assured that she should get up and run violently away, equally assured that such energy of decision was utterly beyond her.

Nor was such energy demanded, for Vivian came back announcing that he himself must go and at once. "It's Frank," he explained. "He's speaking from—it's about all this beastly business; he wants me to go round. . . ." He was

gone with rude abruptness as though he were afraid of remaining (as indeed he was), and Rachael, with a cup of cold coffee in her hand, for a very long time stared into an unmeaning fire. . . .

From St. Jermyn Street Vivian proceeded in a direction most unusual for him, towards Fleet Street, where, hot and angry and nervous, Frank awaited his arrival impatiently.

And Vivian's lithe and handsome body arrived a good deal earlier than his mind, for this was one of those curious occasions when one is certain about a thing long before one is prepared to admit it and one goes on arguing about a line of conduct long after one's mind is made up on it. Chickie had had such an experience when he had spoken over the phone to the alluring Mrs. Hetty; he had seen his decision and the inevitableness of it long before he was prepared to admit its existence, and now Vivian over a matter more subtle was hurrying at great discomfort (it was always a discomfort for him to hurry) towards an act which in prevision he knew he would not do.

Frank had said urgent things over the phone and he said still more urgent ones when Vivian walked gallantly up that little courtyard.

"Chickie is talking the most arrant bosh," he

PREPARATION for LUNCHEON

cried. "Some one has told Rachael about this, and told Chickie that she knows, and he won't go home. Says he can't go home and face her; he is the—most—arrant—ass in all the world."

Vivian nodded, and together they walked in to see the most arrant ass in all the world, as if it were an exhibit in a freak show, for that was Vivian's way of viewing mankind, he being the one and only visitor and the rest exhibits.

"What's all this, Chickie," asked Vivian with the greatest jocularly, "about not going home? You'll have to be smacked or something."

And Chickie, who seemed quite unusually and even unnaturally cheerful, said, "Well, I should very much like to speak to Ray first, to see how much she knows."

"We've rung up Half Moon Street, and Otter says she's gone out," Frank explained, "but he doesn't know where; now where would Rachael have gone to so suddenly to-night?"

Vivian shook his head. "Who knows?" he said slowly. "She goes everywhere."

"I thought perhaps you might know," said Chickie. "I do so want to speak to her, it would—it would make things so much easier."

"She—I—I have no idea," said Vivian; and then, as usually happens in this sort of *impasse*, there fell a silence upon the company. Which

Frank broke by angrily going over familiar old ground: "But, damn it, Chickie," he cried, "why on earth don't you let Vivian and me find the money and settle the whole thing up? Nobody need know, and it's the easiest way out of it for everybody. Why ever not?"

Chickie shook his head. "It's awfully good of you men; don't think that I don't appreciate it, but"—again the exasperating shake of that curly head—"I couldn't do that; you see it's so much like running away, and I'm sure Rachael would think me a coward if I did that."

"I'm sure she'll think you a fool if you don't. If only we could get hold of her! Why on earth didn't you tell her about all this before, Chickie?"

Chickie laughed with his new-found hilarity. "Tell Rachael this? But I—I couldn't trouble Rachael about things like this. She would never even understand them——"

"She would much rather that you had done," Vivian said slowly. "She thought—it must have seemed awful to her not to say anything."

Frank looked at him curiously for a moment. "Well, I'm going out for a bit," he cried suddenly. "Vivian, you stay and persuade Chickie not to be a blithering idiot. It's beyond me." And in a fit of temper quite un-Frankish he flounced outside, where in the bustle of the Street

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bareheaded he paced angrily up and down arguing interminably the old and fruitless story of loyalty *versus* logic, chivalry *versus* cash.

“Chickie won’t tell Rachael, because he thinks it would hurt her . . . of course it would hurt her, but not half as much as not telling her will . . . and now, of course, some other swine has told her . . . he won’t let Vivian and myself find the money, because that would be ‘running away,’ but, damn it, he *has* run away, fifty times already . . . he’s the most determinedly honest criminal that ever was . . . ; to try and placate old Wild, that’s disloyal; to let Vivian and myself get him out of it, that’s disloyal; to get hold of that beastly Philips woman and squeeze the money out of her, that’s disloyal; to give Rachael some sort of warning, say something to prepare her, that’s disloyal; but, of course, to wait like a bleating sheep until he’s hauled up into court and the whole thing’s dragged out in headlines in the Combine rags, that’s the essence of loyalty . . . God save any woman from a loyal husband. . . .”

Oh, yes, Frank was very angry, and though he didn’t know it Fleet Street was very much amused by his bareheaded pacings up and down, and his dark mutterings, and his disgusted gestures as he threw his half-smoked cigarettes away. “Well, anyway,” he thought, “if anybody can make him

see sense it's Vivian. Chickie has always thought more of him than he has of me. . . ."

Which was, curiously enough, true, and Chickie, now seated opposite Vivian, envied him a little that easy mastery of life, that lordliness towards things which invariably he presented.

If a crisis came to Vivian, he thought, not by any means does he get entangled in it; he merely somewhat haughtily sends it round to the side door and hears all about it from the butler in the morning.

Which was, curiously enough, untrue; for when the only crisis worth so calling—entirely a spiritual one—loomed before Vivian he sat before it glum like some sullen captive and quite listlessly watched it wrecking all the things he had that mattered. . . .

"I'm glad," said Chickie, "that you have come, Vivian; and I'm glad that Frank has gone out.

"I suppose," he said, playing with a ruler on the desk before him, "that Rachael is at your place?"

Vivian sat in silence, and after a while Chickie went on. "Of course"—he jabbed the desk a little viciously with the ruler—"of course, she must be. Where else could she be? And she's been so wonderfully loyal to me, has Rachael . . . 'loyalty like the sea,' I read somewhere. . . . She must have been so disappointed in me. You see," he

said with a half-smile, "I've been so *inadequate* for Rachael. Rachael is a spiritual world, and I'm afraid I've never been a conqueror."

He got up and looked at a picture on the wall: it was a Frank Short, hung there by Rachael's own hands in the days when life was to be such an adventure shared so valiantly together, with such childish faith explored hand in hand; the words came back to him even as he gazed through the picture, through the wall beyond, into God knows what seas of incoherent, idiotic courage.

"Oh, Vivian," he said, steadying his voice, "you must—you must be so much more to her. God never meant such loveliness to be unfulfilled, and I've so utterly failed her. You can match it perhaps, perhaps you can keep pace with it, you can be worthy of the regality she confers . . . in her eyes," he said very softly (but the other heard every word of it), "in her dark eyes, oh, I've lived there once, I *have*, I have, no man can deny me that . . . perhaps for a moment I was even adequate . . . for one little moment. . . . She was very lovely," he said.

But Vivian in silence said not a single word.

Brave Chickie, of such splendid stupidity, Chickie that was so apprehensive of life, was so loath of it, so harassed in it, that most triumphantly outplayed it—salute him, all the brave

men behind the gates where the gods' darlings go . . . salute the Cavalier . . . Chickie the Cavalier. . . .

"I think," he said, his mouth twisting a little uneasily, "that I will go into the next room for a minute. I—I—shall not be—long. . . ."

And very, very silent sat Vivian; for a long time he sat silent, nor did he start even when he heard what he expected—merely he moistened his lips a little and moved thoughtfully towards the street.

Something he left behind; all that once had joined him to the careless, cultured, chivalrous young Georgians; all that lay shrivelled up in slime like the sloughed skin of a once splendid snake.

Towards the street he walked and out into its blackness . . . the gay and gallant Vivian. . . .

There were four moments in the life of Rachael when she who walked with such proud aloofness through the way of things was fain suddenly of a friend, knew on an instant that primitive instinct, half hope, half fear, which drives a man in desperation to battle blindly through the cold engulfing mists of loneliness that encompass each human heart.

One moment and its impulse had driven her to Hugh's chambers, a white, alluring, wonderful

## PREPARATION *for* LUNCHEON

temptation, in days long—ah, how long—ago.

Another, and it was a protracted one, had been on her when stretching out a white, tapering hand across dark, unfathomable seas (that were no more than a teashop table with two penny buns thereon) she grasped the human hand of Chickie.

A third now made her seek the solace of a woman. Many courtiers Rachael had and eager, whose spiritual swords lay always loose in scabbard for her slightest want; but curiously unsatisfying they proved in the event.

And Rachael now sought Dorothy Martindale, who, from being first a fledgling under her powerful protection, had grown a balanced woman caught up in no such uncertainties of spirit as was Rachael. Mrs. Macready flashed across Rachael's mind, but Mrs. Macready, she thought, has too much experience to be unbiased; Dorothy, she knew, was young enough to think the best of a few people.

So Dorothy it was.

And of all the strange women who in varying degrees of dishonour and delight had at different times gone towards that sombre house in St. Jermyn Street none ever sped more swiftly than did Mrs. Frank Martindale on that warm, lovely night in June.

Rachael was there seated in a huge armchair

(Vivian did himself well in the way of chairs, saying that as Providence had obviously intended us to sit on things soft and comfortable it would be frustrating its design not to do so); Rachael, a little tragically pale perhaps, but composed and delightful. Always was Rachael delightful.

Dorothy showed no surprise that Rachael should be where she was. "I was a fool not to think of it," she said, "but where is Dalmeny?"

"Oh, Vivian," Rachael pleaded. "Things are much too horrid, Doro, to stab one another with words . . . Vivian. . . ."

Dorothy nodded. "I'm sorry, Ray," she said, "you are quite right. Dear Rachael, you have always been so absolutely right, and it was only because I'm jealous of the love he has for you."

Rachael caught a little at her heart.

"—Vivian, then," Doro said. "Where is he?"

"Frank phoned for him from Ch—the office."

"Frank phoned for him?" Dorothy asked puzzled. "But why? Surely he would have rung me up if—I wonder why. . . ."

Rachael's exquisite white shoulders were eloquent of doubt.

"But who knows?" she said, smiling just a little wistfully. "Perhaps he thought that Vivian's blandishments . . ."

"Besides," she said, "what man ever came to a

woman for advice while yet advice was of any use? What man," she asked in a curiously domesticated simile, "ever came to have his trouser-buttons sewn on before they had quite utterly come off?"

They both laughed at that, and at its cruel incongruity.

"How hot it is!" said Rachael, throwing her wrap aside and her mood deepening suddenly. "I feel oppressed."

"Perhaps it will thunder; it seems so close."

"Dorothy," asked Rachael suddenly with an appealing gesture, "what will come of this?"

"Why will men be so stubbornly unwise?" she asked; and to both her queries Dorothy maintained a silence.

Which she broke at last by saying, "Oh, Ray, I'm afraid that your heart married, but your head did not, and so now you have a heartache instead of only a headache."

"Why can't life be lived simply, Doro?" cried Rachael; "it was so nice and enjoyable—life was such a jolly friend when it was uncomplicated, and now . . . Oh, Doro, we are women, *women*, and I thought we were only girls. . . ."

She walked towards the window and looked out; Doro's slow eyes followed the liteness, the irrepressible grace of that movement; Rachael's

body made you feel proud of humanity; inconceivable it was that such a lovely thing should be distorted, tortured by idiocy.

"Life has to be complicated," she said, "to justify the existence of religions. And men are never quite so incredibly foolish as they seem; I think that Vivian, who like a drunkard on a tight-rope has all the steadiness of insanity, will somehow bring him out of all this folly. . . ."

Said Rachael, her mind now a little distracted, "I wonder which came first—the complications or the religions; which is cause and which effect, I wonder?"

"Yes," she went on, turning towards the room again, "I think perhaps that Vivian will make sanity prevail, and I do think that he is a dear man to have undertaken it. Vivian may have been dangerous," she said, "a little, but he has been very, very dear. . . ."

To which observations Mrs. Frank Martindale replied nothing at all.

And then, by this and by that, they fell into discussing all the charmingly intimate things which women wherever and whenever forgathered will discuss. . . .

On the last day when all the great trumps have sounded and the dread Judgment begins, as each

## PREPARATION for LUNCHEON

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is up to separate examination, that excited  
dabling noise you shall catch will not be the  
penitent hastily running over their larger faults,  
nor the optimistic hopefully rehearsing their more  
specious excuses; it will be a vast conglomeration,  
adding up and totalling of ten thousand thou-  
sand whispers—"Caught up at the waist, my  
dear."

Into which intimacies there intruded that sound,  
always full of significance for those within, of keys  
grating and turning in a lock. It caused the two  
women to exchange glances at first almost of ap-  
prehension, as though they had been guilty of  
neglect in their conversation, and then at once of  
hope, as who would say, "the men have returned  
dominant and overbearing as ever, but, thank  
goodness, safe."

For every woman, especially every married  
woman, knows that at certain periods and seasons  
in the year their men-kind will disappear, as do  
many other animals, for the private practice of  
their more intimate idiocies and that after a while  
they will return to resume their lordly arrogance  
and once more to do whatsoever they may be told.

Men are like that.

There were voices, mumbled and suppressed,  
below.

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"I expect they have all come," said Doro.
"How splendid. . . ."

"How nice of Vivian . . ." Rachael murmured.

There were entrances: Vivian first, naturally, and then a little laggardly Frank, and last, behind Frank—nothing, an empty doorway. . . .

"Hallo," cried Dorothy, "but where is Chickie? Downstairs?"

Vivian shook his head, unnaturally.

"But what have you done with him?" Rachael asked, smiling.

Frank spoke. "Chickie," he said—"no—well—you see—he hasn't come—he—he met with an accident. . . ."

"Yes," Vivian added, thoughtfully looking at a picture, "he blew his brains out."

In Rachael's breast, that had suddenly gone cold under her hand like some beautiful white marble, was horror; in her head was horror uncomprehending; in her eyes, those lovely depths, was horror quite incredulous.

Twice now had Vivian, the offhand, dashing Vivian, brought her such news, twice guided the sword that pierced her very heart.

"He blew his brains out." Oh, admirable lucidity. . . .

That had pierced her heart and now her pride.

PREPARATION for LUNCHEON

Oh, Rachael, Life has dealt hardly with you who were so desirous of it, very cruelly now encompassed you who once so overtopped it. . . .

A room of four people; of whom Three most dearly loved One. And one was staring blankly at a wall, and one with passionate "Rachael . . . Rachael . . ." was on her frightened knees, and one was mixing a glass of whisky and laughing very low to himself . . . laughing . . . laughing. . . .

You see, Frank had not often seen Death, and when a man places a revolver well inside his mouth and carefully pulls the trigger, and moreover foolishly chooses a small room in which to do it, with paper—once white and virginal—lying about, the result is apt to be disconcerting. . . .

So Three; and One, rocking a little to and fro, her white hand clutched to a still whiter breast, as in defence against a hostile world, thought long and earnestly of God nor man knows what.

CHAPTER XIII

WHY RACHAEL *refused* COFFEE

YOU are now and hereby invited to enjoy a wonderful spring day in that very poignant year 1923.

1923 has been the best year since the stroke of doom; it saw the valiant fight of all the dear and dying things leap up to its strongest point against the oncoming crushing momentum of democracy. A very old man to-day, say of ninety or more winters, is in a remarkable position; in dim corners of his mind as he sits huddled over a convenient gas-fire he can catch again the merry jingle of the horses' bells, see all the swaggering bravado of the flying coach; he can remember the time when the thing which for two thousand years has been so closely bound up with, has almost determined, our civilization—the horse—was hardly past its prime.

The horse; the slow lifting of the fear of the French, that lay so long in England; and all the growth and maturity of the Victorian solidarity; these, as queer, almost incredible pictures of an age gone by, will ever and again flash through that ancient mind.

But the young man of to-day! When, if ever (which seems unlikely), he is ninety-three, what a bridge between two how differing epochs will his life be!

How will our grandchildren gather round as we mumble toothlessly of those incredible days when brave and scarlet the kings went down to Westminster—and how shall we make them understand that it was a king who had no power, and of whom the majority of his subjects never so much as thought from one year's end to another. . . .

But then perhaps the doctors, with their queer cuttings from monkeys, will have us bright and lively, gums full of healthy teeth, to the last; and perhaps Dr. Marie Stopes with cuttings from her books will deny us our admiring grandchildren; perhaps our ghastly farce of progress will deprive us of the comfortable senility to which we all look forward—we shall be jerky, curious, unrestful, puppets to the end.

Still, spring is spring; it was in Uriconium, and it will be when London Bridge is down. And this was a particularly nice spring day; one, moreover, in February, like a child born before its time lustily crying its delight at a new-found world. It was full of that most subtly elusive thing, the colour of London.

So admire the snug fit of your new spring over-

coat, somewhat fastidiously handle your amber cane, and walk elegantly towards your lunch as if the world belonged to you.

As indeed it did! We, even we, who have lived only in the bedraggled tail-end of aristocracy, we can remember the days when somebody did own something, instead of everybody owning nothing; recall the time when individuals, whom we even saw, were possessors of a very large part of the earth on which they lived, much more than you might compass in a day's journeying—more puzzles for posterity!

So while we own the earth, or some of it, certainly let us enjoy it; as did Vivian, walking gaily towards his club, which still—much to his delight—suffered from waitresses.

Vivian, still possessing so many of the traits Vivianesque; still so determinedly ignorant of any life but his own; so appreciative of Beauty; so deliberately superior; still a really good walking justification of the system aristocratic; still, happily, unenlightened as to the thinness with which all these things wear sooner or later, the hollowness with which the cymbals clash; still magnificently capable of the grand compliment, of the royal rudeness. . . .

Very much in love, too, Vivian now (that was a prefiguring of change, perhaps)—in love, more-

WHY RACHAEL *refused* COFFEE

over, with a poster. One of those alluring things issued on behalf of Palm Olive soap, but for the moment I forget which.

This lapse into romanticism Vivian had confessed to Frank, who remarked, with somewhat cryptic sourness, that it was better to be in love with a poster than with a four-poster, which was the usual object of Vivian's affections.

You see, much as Frank liked Vivian—and that was very much—he could not now think of all the complicated Chickie business and of Vivian's share therein without a little shadow of uneasy apprehension clouding his mind . . . that warm night in June, in the middle of all the agony and labour of the Street, so startlingly had Vivian appeared beside him, so unconcernedly announced his news. . . .

So, alternately in doubt and in defiant loyalty, Frank fought shy of Vivian and then assiduously cultivated him; which treatment, if Vivian minded, he showed it not one whit; he walked his easy, elegant way through things, and certainly not for any male would he in any wise deviate from it.

But it was to be observed that for Dorothy Vivian had no eyes whatsoever, or rather that he had eyes and very good ones, but that they were used to good purpose while yet she was in the distance: as now, for instance, when suddenly sensing

the imminent danger of meeting her his easy steps were swung across the road, and in a protective whirl of motor-cars and buses he was completely swallowed up, while harmlessly by on the other side went Mrs. Dorothy Martindale and the infant George. . . .

For Frank, you see, had become most thoroughly domesticated, nurseries and children and things—very old-fashioned, of course, but still quite amusing. . . .

George. . . . “No hyphenated names for me,” as Dorothy had somewhat bitterly said; just plain George Martindale. And a very wise and sober-looking infant, too, that listened most attentively to all the idiotic noises that its parents made at it, and whenever it saw Vivian sprawled heroically towards him. . . . All children loved Vivian. . . . Children naturally love dogs, unmoral people, clowns, and very brightly painted wooden toys—a curious assortment.

Vivian had always thought that of all the misguided forms of human generosity that of going about giving other people pieces of one’s mind was the worst. And it was a practice to which, following perhaps a little of Mrs. Macready’s mental footsteps, Dorothy Martindale was somewhat addicted. Vivian could only explain it by surmising that it was the fundamental country-wench in Dor-

othy periodically rising to the top, "the ineradicable mark," as he once said (to himself), "of the milking-stool."

And there had been a day when Dorothy had delivered herself of a very considerable portion of her mind to Vivian; the milking-stool had been positively rampant. . . .

Thus: to Vivian, sitting one morning in June moodily in his house in St. Jermyn Street, there came suddenly, imperiously brushing aside butlers and such minor obstructions, Mrs. Dorothy Martindale.

Vivian rose with grace.

"I have been trying to get you all morning on the phone," she cried.

"I have disconnected it. . . ."

She stared at him curiously. "How like you," she said with a hard little laugh, a rather disconcerting laugh. "After last night, how typical!

"Fear," she said. "Fancy being afraid . . . afraid . . . at least I thought you would have the insolence to face people. . . ."

"The cad," she said slowly, "and now. the coward. . . ."

Vivian yawned.

"And are you so very much afraid," she whispered, "so very much afraid of Rachael?"

Vivian yawned again (it was really very early

MOCKBEGGAR

for him, and, besides, he was good at that sort of thing).

"Don't bother to be dramatic," he said; "it rather bores me, I think; but do go on about Rachael, please; I am always intensely interested in her. . . ."

"*Interested* . . . my God!" said Dorothy quietly. "But men are brutes . . . all selfishness and snobbishness and sex . . . brutes every one. . . . Why, do you suppose, did Frank leave you alone with—with Chickie last night, you who could so easily have—have prevented everything?"

"Rather funk'd it all himself, I suppose," said Vivian easily, who supposed nothing of the sort.

The two looked at one another in silence, both a little white and tired in the cruel morning light.

"May I smoke?" asked Vivian, who was missing his morning cigar and feeling very angry about it and about sundry other things too into the bargain. "Or would you consider that selfish?"

"And if," he added, "you can restrain your dramatic tendencies for a few moments I will tell you just exactly what you want to know."

"Wilson," said Vivian in a curiously detached and unnatural voice, "spent about ten minutes after your husband had gone out in telling me what for a very long time, from the beginning,

WHY RACHAEL refused COFFEE

in fact, I have always known—that I should better have suited Rachael for a husband than did he. I was so completely in agreement with him that I found it unnecessary to say anything——”

“Ah——” said Dorothy.

“He has, I think,” Vivian said with sudden bitterness, “completely *sterilized* Rachael; a curious effect for marriage to have. . . . I think that even when he had gone into the inner office, had I followed him I might have prevented—stopped him. . . . Oh, I think so,” he said, looking a little vacantly before him, “but I didn’t. . . .”

“You didn’t . . . oh, you *beast*. . . .” She moved very close to him. “You Judas,” she whispered.

Vivian laughed, a not very hearty laugh, and said, “And all that, of course, will make me much more interested in Rachael than ever. . . .”

Dorothy turned sharply from the door; she sensed the threat in that.

“I thought perhaps you would have forgone that,” she said.

Whereat Vivian laughed again.

“Please,” she said, “oh, please, Vivian, you mustn’t . . .”

In defence of Rachael, a goddess so beloved, pride was a little thing to lose. “Vivian,” she said, one hand pathetically outheld in supplica-

tion, "if ever—if ever you have liked me, *don't*; oh, please, *don't*; Rachael is so much to us all, and she is so insecure, so buffeted by things . . . Vivian, because you once liked me——"

"But did I? I had forgotten, I am so sorry . . . one overlooks these things." He consulted his watch. "I am exceedingly sorry that you have to go," he said. "I have an appointment. . . ." He rang the bell.

That was what usually happened to women who came to give Vivian a piece of their mind; they started with knives, as it were, and they ended on their knees.

A man, you see, has always such reserves of brutality to draw upon. . . .

So that's how it was that Vivian, walking lightly to his lunch, felt it expedient to avoid Mrs. Dorothy Martindale. He had a genius for avoiding the unpleasant, had our Vivian . . . the gay and gallant Vivian. . . .

1923 was a year of conspiracies, of course.

There was the giant conspiracy in which everybody took part to pretend that the King's forces had not been kicked out of Ireland; and there was the rather threadbare one, which was just as general, to maintain that we were still the lords of

creation and that all the old comfortable lies about empires and constitutions and things, that had deceived us so admirably before the War, would go on deceiving us after it; there was even a valiant attempt to revive the pitiful pretence that those curiously misused words Conservative and Liberal still meant something intelligible. Men went about muttering them reverently as of old, and expected from their utterance the comfortable serenity of the great Victorian lie to fall once more upon the land, instead of that there fell the shadow of Mr. Ramsay Macdonald, and everybody was very much disappointed.

It is a very curious thing that after a party had really rather heroically restrained its "wild and woolly west" element until it had, by all the laws of the game, a genuine Constitutional right to be called upon to form a government all the waddling wiseacres who for years had never uttered the sacred words "British Constitution" without a grateful glance to Heaven should be seized suddenly of qualms as to the soundness of that Providence-provided thing.

On such instabilities are we grounded. . . .

And there was a conspiracy, of course, to keep the more distressing features of the tragic *affaire Wilson* from Rachael. A conspiracy determined mainly by Mrs. Macready, who at a meeting of

conspirators held at the Martindales' house had said finally to Dorothy, "Never wilfully destroy a beautiful thing, my dear, even when it is a lie. I was once young enough to think that Truth was beautiful, but if Life is the nearest approach we shall make to Truth I must revise my opinion. I am an old woman," she said, moving towards the door, "and I do not wish to learn any more Truth at all; it is so disillusioning. I shall live now contemplating all the dreams of years gone by." She smiled a little wearily. "I never wish to be so near the stage again," she said; "one sees too much. Will somebody get me my stick, please?" and with her stick, which Frank brought from the hall, Mrs. Macready walked firmly out.

Mrs. Macready; the Duchess, as Rachael had irreverently dubbed her, so constant in her opinions, so inflexible . . . so outspoken in their enunciation, so honest in their application; that very noble thing, an English lady of degree.

Her world had crumbled about her; one by one all the old friends had gone, marvelling each at her unchanged vitality, and now the new world, her young friends, whom, for all the roughness of her tongue, she loved so well, how they had quailed and failed: Hugh, Chickie, Vivian. . . .

She would often come and look at young George

Martindale, the only one of many children she had hoped to see, wondering what intolerable conditions of life were to be laid upon him, what stresses . . . and her mind would go back to her own childhood days in retrospect so undisturbed, so Paradisial. . . . "Don't coddle the child," she would sharply admonish Dorothy, "but for goodness' sake," she would add from the door, "don't neglect him. It's not a bit unfashionable to have children or to suckle them—splendid historical examples, you know . . ." And with her stick she would go, walking a little more slowly perhaps than of old, but as unflinchingly as ever.

I think many of us weaklings will take heart when we see that sober, upright figure walking firmly up the Golden Stairs. . . .

And what of Rachael, who so foolishly refused comfort of all her friends; who sat, on this spring morning which you were invited to enjoy, solitary in the Green Park; whose beauty horror had served only to enhance—what of her?

Dark Rachael. . . . The wild spontaneity of young loveliness in her had blossomed into such mature wonder. . . . Wherever Rachael went men stared a little curiously after her as though they had at last caught sight of something which for long they had been seeking.

But Rachael moved through them as though they had been shadows; as now indeed, she thought, all men must be. . . . A dream there once had been, and that was Hugh. . . . How he laughed once, how his lips had been warm on hers, his kind eyes laughing into hers; now he was lonely dust blown up and down the long highways of France . . . Hugh. . . . And Chickie . . . it was hard in retrospect to believe what he had been to her, that to him, a rather close, short-sighted, searching little atom, to him alone, had she not been inviolable. . . . And Vivian, who once had cried, "March with me, and we should storm the very citadel of Life itself," to whose spirit one aspect of her own had been so much akin, to whom so much of her distress she had confided; who now, she bitterly thought, must know in what travail I go, in how much need of a great fineness in things and yet he stands utterly away, not one word, not one gesture . . . she laughed . . . a *gesture*! He had been so free of the grand gesture, so sudden with his sword, and now in the fight it was nothing but a cardboard toy . . . Vivian . . . a marionette that danced on sterile strings. . . .

Rachael's dark eyes watched children playing in the Park . . . children . . . and when for a long time she had looked at them, and seen so

WHY RACHAEL refused COFFEE

much more than them, she got up and walked out with grace.

With no less grace perhaps, though of a different kind, than that with which Vivian, at another entrance, just then walked into the same park.

Life is like that, of course.

For by this time he had learned something of her habits and recovered something of his courage, but though he walked with elegant care throughout the Park and in there saw children playing seriously, and happy, furtive couples successfully deluding themselves, not one sign did he see of that dark and lovely lady whom he sought.

So on to lunch solitary and a little soured. . . .

Rachael had thought once of becoming a nun; partly that she might meditate on those great fundamental truths of morality and religion which alone give to life anything of stability and worth; and partly, also, because she thought the uniform so becoming; but she had learned, to her sorrow, that nuns were not allowed to smoke; and that, of course, deterred her. . . .

It occurred to her also to take up social work; and of all places the Mile End Road was lighted by Rachael's beauty; it was rather fun, at first, being addressed as "fellow-worker" by a lot of

earnest people in spectacles; but it appeared that the house in the Mile End Road was innocent of a bath—baths, it seemed, were not among the social virtues, and that, of course, would never do. . . .

So Rachael fell into her lonely, lovely way and moved a little here, a little there, always elegantly and with taste.

She took to writing articles for some of the more sparkling of the younger reviews; a habit which more than ever confirmed her in her attitude of a spectator in Life.

Life, she thought, is a very curious business; all this hurrying to and fro, all this lusting and loving, and burning of spirit; but it must pass me by, she thought, without any participation in it.

Had she caught at Life when, in the olden incredible days of Hugh and wonder, it stretched out golden hands, ah, had she caught at it then abandonedly she might indeed have come to see this ridiculous, bustling business with a more personal understanding, might even have bustled with it herself.

She would think of Dorothy; once so much a young, eager admirer, delighted beyond girlish words at being allowed to share her bedroom, now rather ostentatiously dangling young George on her knee whenever Rachael called, busy about many things. . . .

Rachael wondered what it was like to have children; a little thrilling, she thought, at first, but rather boring in the long run, no doubt.

And from Dorothy she would fall to thinking of her men-kind, as now at the close of this spring day she did, seated in her dining-room in Half Moon Street.

And thinking of them Rachael would lose heart and take it.

Lose heart, when she thought of how sadly her company was dispersed; of how whatsoever man she had moved with he had in some way failed: his body had failed him, as did Hugh's; his sense of humour, as did Chickie's; or his spirit, as, apparently, did Vivian's. She thought of all the mocking might-have-beens, and that was very, very sad for Rachael, so that her beautiful eyes glistened like torches in a gloom.

Then would Rachael, being careful of her beauty, reprimand herself for endangering so sacred a trust, and it would come into her memory that of all her circle and age none had so triumphantly queened it as she. None had walked, in the careless years, with such a generous chivalry about her. None had ever meant to so many and so surprising men the embodiment of that which they dare not hope to attain.

At which thoughts Rachael's eyes would shine

a little imperiously and she would say, "I am always Rachael and I am always beautiful; and men," she would add very low in her heart, "must always love me."

And long she would wonder whether that inevitable love would bring inevitably joy or pain.

For she knew, it being clearly writ in her destiny, and still more clearly foretold by Madame Zarella of Regent Street for five and a half guineas a time, that of her very nature was she cast for a big part. Though temporarily she might be among the supers she could not long be absent from the stars.

Rachael was star-born, and her loveliness, which even now had done sufficient hurt, was destined to do far more—to raise men up dream-palaces of unattainable delight and to shatter them into five million nothings; for when the light of Rachael once having shone in a man's life was therefrom removed he went in such bitter darkness as is barely tolerable.

God fashions His weapons with a craftsman's care, and this lovely sword of Rachael He was to wield to tragic purpose.

An inkling of which came on that night to Rachael seated solitary in that fastidious room in Half Moon Street.

And she thought within her heart, "Life is not

WHY RACHAEL refused COFFEE

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all emptiness, not all vain stretching out; there are many beautiful things in Life, and I will sample them.

"There is passion," she thought, "and all the chivalry of men. There are swords that will ring for me; men even that will die for me . . . and there shall be a gallantry about my life," she thought, "because always I am Rachael.

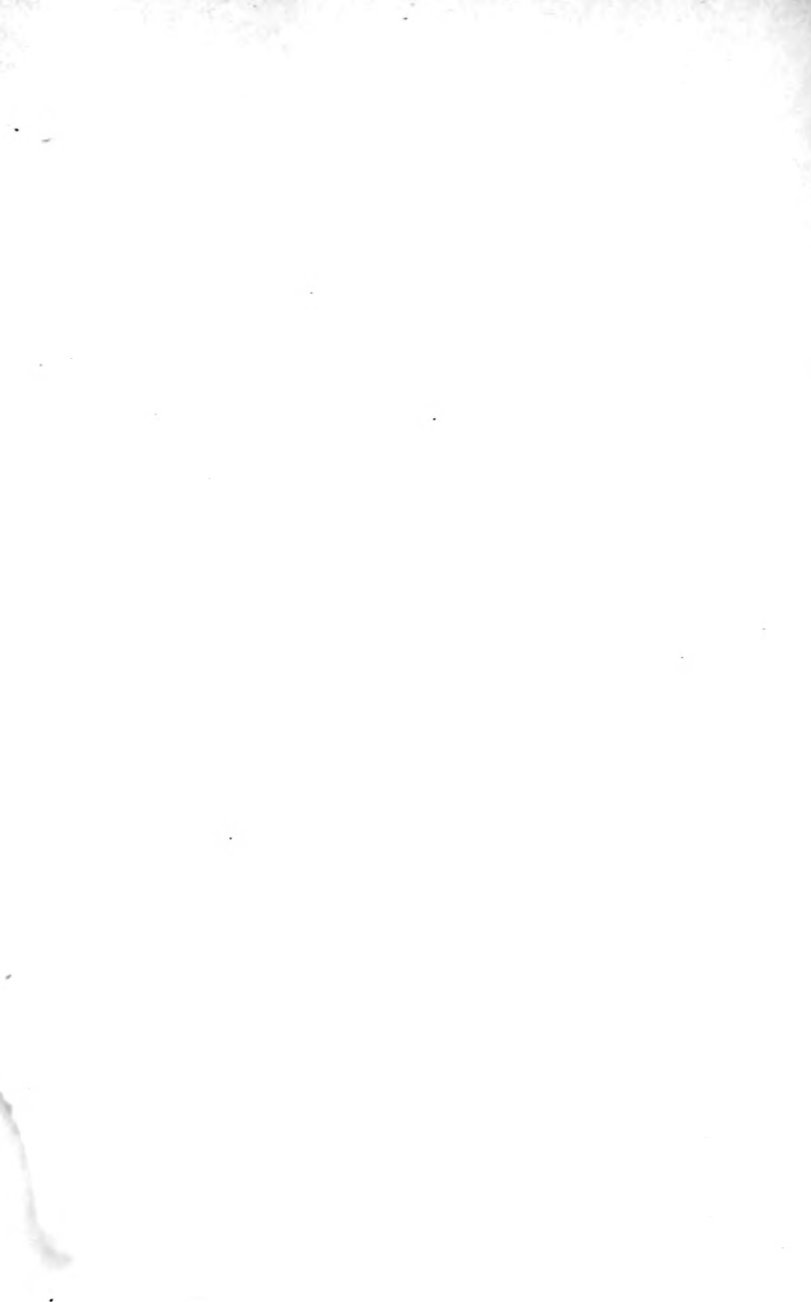
"I have rested from Life, I will wrestle with it. . . ."

And Rachael, haughtily refusing coffee, went with a sudden gesture out into the darkness.

And it was night. . . .

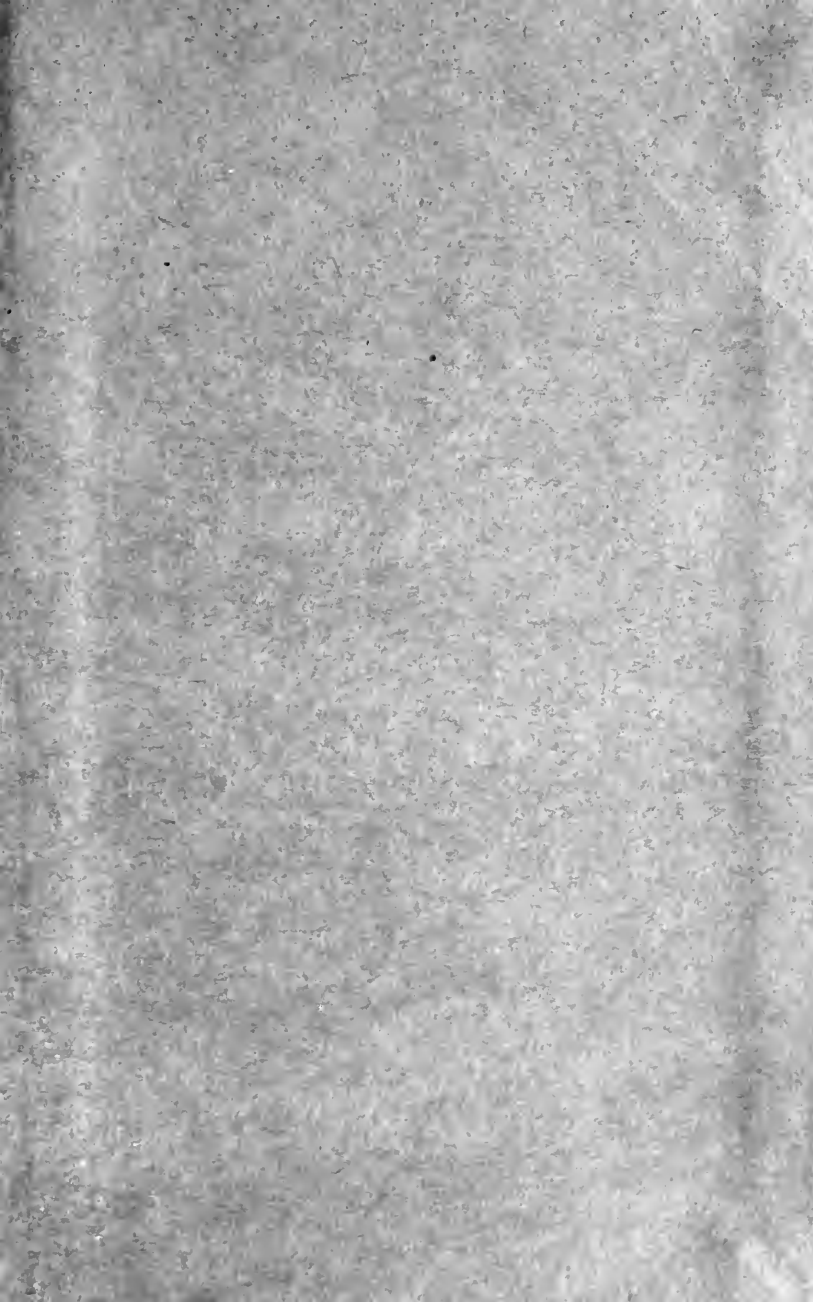
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THE END











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